

CRITICAL FAILURES II

FAIL HARDER



ROBERT BEVAN

Critical Failures II

Fail Harder

By Robert Bevan

Copyright 2013 Robert Bevan

Special Thanks to:

My wife, No Young Sook, who let me escape to my office so many mornings while she got the kids ready for school.

Joan Reginaldo, the best beta reader in the world. No, you can't have her! She's mine!

Steve Wetherell, who thought up the title and (more importantly) the tagline for this book. If you're ever in the mood for some great comic fantasy with a little more charm and a little less swearing and poop, his Doomsayer Series is a great read. Go check out his [Amazon page](#).

Multiple Orc Chasms



ROBERT BEVAN

CAVERNS & CREATURES

Get 'Multiple Orc Chasms' for FREE!

Enter your email address to get your free ebook:

[CLICK HERE!](#)

Chapter 1

Dave approached the bar of the Piss Bucket Tavern with his empty tankard. As thick and sturdily built as his dwarf legs were, they trembled slightly as he walked. The bartender was a monster, covered in reddish-brown hair all over its seven foot tall body. Great pointy horns spiraled out from either side of its head, and it wore a gold nose ring in its snout. It set the thick glass mug it had been wiping clean noisily down on the bar with a huge clawed hand and looked down at Dave.

“What’ll it be?” its voice hit Dave’s nerves like a truck.

“Another beer, sir,” Dave said meekly. “If you please.”

A nearby table of dwarves erupted into laughter, and Dave couldn’t shake the feeling that he was somehow the butt of the joke. The same thing had happened the past five times he’d gone up for a refill.

The bartender glanced over at their table, and then flashed a wicked grin full of pointed white teeth down at Dave.

“Right away, little feller.”

Dave held the beer with two hands on the way back to his table to mitigate the spillage caused by his trembling. The beer was warm, and tasted only marginally better than the name of the establishment suggested, but it wasn’t doing anything to dull his nerves. He couldn’t seem to get anything close to a buzz going.

None of his companions seemed to be having any such trouble. Even Tim seemed to have temporarily forgotten that somewhere, in another world – the real world – a guy was dying in his freezer. Of course, Tim had already drunk three tankards of beer that were nearly big enough for him to swim in. The stools in this tavern weren’t made to accommodate halflings, so Tim’s head was barely visible above the table.

Julian lay face down on the table after only two cups. His stupid sombrero took up half of the table space. So much for elves not being able to sleep. Ravenus perched on the table, bobbing his beak into what remained of Julian’s beer.

Cooper had a jolly air about him. He’d drunk nearly twice as much beer as Dave had, but he was also nearly twice as big as Dave. And he seemed to be maintaining the same happy buzz he’d acquired around the end of his first beer.

Katherine was standing at the end of the bar, drinking something the color of Windex out of a clear glass, no doubt paid for by the young man who was chatting her up. Chaz sat on a stool next to her, nursing a second beer and trying desperately to stay awake. He still hadn’t completely recovered from the Constitution damage he’d taken

from the troll spear.

“I don’t mind saying,” said Dave to anyone who was listening. He jerked his head back toward the bartender. “That guy scares the shit out of me.”

“He seemed pretty cool to me,” said Cooper through a thick cloud of grayish-white smoke that hung in the air. Cooper probably wouldn’t have minded if Satan himself was running the bar, now that he had finally found a place where he could buy cigarettes. “Fuck, at least he was willing to let me in, unlike the cockbags at the first three bars we tried.”

“I wouldn’t let you into my bar either if I was them,” Tim spoke slowly and deliberately, his speech blurring. He hiccupped, burped, and paused a moment before continuing. “I mean, look around.” He waved his tankard around. “This is a rough place. That giant hairy motherfucker at the bar – hiccup – hasn’t got anything to fear from you. But those first three guys, they were... um... what’s the word – *hiccup* – human. And you’re a half-orc barbarian. No sir. If I don’t think I could take a guy down in a fight, I’m not letting him into my bar.” He took another swig of beer.

Cooper snorted. “That would make your bar a nursery school.”

Tim sprayed beer all over Cooper’s face, choked on what little he’d managed to keep in his mouth, and fell off of his stool. His glass shattered on the floor.

Dave looked around. The only one in the tavern who seemed to have noticed the sound of breaking glass was the bartender, who grunted and nodded a waitress in their direction. Dave pulled Tim up to his feet and set him back on his stool.

“Shit,” said Tim, looking at the broken glass handle still clutched in his tiny hand. “I need another beer.”

Dave leaned toward him. “You need to take it easy.”

“Listen Dave,” said Tim, waving the handle vaguely in his direction. “I’ve had a rough fucking – *hiccup* – day. I’m going to drink all the drink I want to – *hiccup* – drink.”

“Fine,” said Dave. “I just don’t want to get on the wrong side of that...” he jerked his head back toward the bar. “... whatever that thing is back there.”

“Minotaur,” said Cooper.

“How do you know?” asked Dave.

“I had you guys fight some of them a while back when I was running the game. The picture in the Monster Manual looked just like that dude at the bar.”

Tim started to get up, but Dave put a hand on his shoulder. Tim jerked away and fell off his stool again.

Dave picked him up. “Look,” he said. “I’ll get you another beer

when I go back and get one for myself. Deal?"

Tim leaned over and vomited on the floor. The waitress, who had just turned up with a mop and bucket, sighed and shook her head.

"Deal," said Tim.

"How are you guys getting so trashed on this stuff?" Dave asked, turning his attention to Cooper.

"It's fucking beer," said Cooper. "Getting trashed is what it's made for. A better question is, how are you not getting trashed? You've gone back and forth to the bar like half a dozen times already."

"I don't know," said Dave. He necked the last three quarters of his beer, shrugged, and headed back to the bar.

One of the female dwarves from the group which seemed to be having a hell of a lot more fun than he was approached the bar at the same time. She wasn't the sort of girl Dave would have been attracted to back in the real world. She was shaped, much like himself, like a very short gorilla, and she had a tiny wisp of a beard twisted into a braid at the end of her chin. But for some reason, he found himself very attracted to her now, and he was fairly certain it had nothing to do with the seven pints of beer he'd drunk.

He gaped at her for a moment before he caught himself. She seemed to be purposefully avoiding looking at him, and maybe even trying not to laugh.

"Here you go, Jorn," said the barkeep, slamming a mug of bubbling green liquid down on the bar. The sound startled Dave. "And another – *snort* – beer for you, sir?"

Whatever self-control the she-dwarf had maintained up till now suddenly abandoned her. She slammed her hand down on the bar and convulsed in laughter. Her companions at the bar started up again as well.

Dave was annoyed and confused, but he did his best to ignore them. The bubbling drink on the bar was more interesting to him at present. "What's that?" he asked.

The dwarf girl raised a hand in a gesture that Dave interpreted to mean that she would answer his question when she got her laughter under control. Eventually her convulsions gave way to chuckles, and then to giggles, and then to heavy, controlled breathing.

"Stonepiss," she finally said.

"Come again?"

She broke into laughter again, but quickly brought it back under control.

"What's so goddamn funny?"

"Aw come on," she tugged on Dave's beard. "We's just havin' a little fun. If you's don't like drunks, you's shouldn't be hangin' 'round in a tavern."

"I like drunks as much as the next guy," said Dave pleadingly. "I've been trying as hard as I can all evening to be one."

The dwarf girl's face briefly looked sober in its confusion. She looked up at the minotaur. Dave followed her eyes to find that the bartender was staring back at him with the same confused expression that she had.

"What?" asked Dave, doing his best to keep his voice below a shout.

"If you's wants to be drunk," said the dwarf, "then why's you been drinkin' beer all night?"

Dave scrutinized her with narrowed eyes. Then he nodded toward his own table. "It seems to be getting the job done for my friends well enough."

She stared at him dumbly. "Are you's jokin' with me?"

"What are you talking about?"

She spoke slowly, as if she were attempting to explain particle physics to a three year old. "None of you's friends is dwarves."

Dave stared blankly, hoping she would elaborate.

"A dwarf can't get drunk on something so weak as beer."

Dave slammed a fist down on the table. "Of course!" he shouted. "I've got a +2 bonus to Saving Throws versus poison!"

"You's got what?"

"Never mind," said Dave ecstatically. "Barkeep, a cup of your finest stonepiss, if you please!"

A chorus of cheers roared out from the table of dwarves.

Dave felt blood rush into his face. He hadn't realized they had all been hanging on every word of his conversation.

"My name's Jorn," said the she-dwarf, offering her hand.

"Dave," he said, taking her hand. She gave him a firm shake.

"Try you's drink."

Dave held the bubbling cup in front of his face. It smelled like vinegar and feet. He closed his eyes, tipped back his head, and poured it in. It went down his esophagus like it was made up of thousands of tiny electric eels. He shuddered, puckered his lips, tapped the bar gently a few times with his fist, and finally exhaled.

"Fuck me, that's good," he said, wiping a tear from his eye. "I can't remember the last time I –"

"Hey!" roared the bartender, the geniality gone from his voice entirely. Yes, this is what he imagined a minotaur sounding like. He hefted himself over the bar, and Dave didn't even have to look to know which table he was headed to.

He looked anyway, just in time to see Cooper holding a mug of beer in one hand, and holding Julian's head up by the hair with his other hand. Julian was pointing a finger at Cooper's beer, and Dave could have sworn that there had been some kind of blue energy beam

coming out of it. But another shout from the bartender got Cooper's attention. The beam had disappeared, and Julian's face fell down in a smack on the table. He showed no sign of having felt it. Dave rushed to his table to see what he could do to mitigate the damage.

The bartender grabbed Cooper by a fleshy pointed ear and swiveled his head toward the bar.

"Ow," said Cooper.

"Cooper!" shouted Dave. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do nothin'," said Cooper.

"Can't you read the sign?" bellowed the bartender.

"No," said Cooper, wincing and unsuccessfully trying to yank his ear free from the minotaur's grip. "I can't read the fucking sign."

Dave turned around to see what sign Cooper was supposed to be looking at. He found it nailed to a post behind the bar. "It says 'No politics. No fighting. No magic.'" The word 'magic' was underlined three times in what Dave guessed was not rusty brown paint.

"It says 'No Magic', Cooper. What was that blue light?"

"It's been a long day," said Cooper. "And this beer is warm as shit. So I asked Julian to cast a Ray of Frost on it."

"Why?" asked the bartender. He let go of Cooper's ear. "What difference does that make?"

"Try it," said Cooper, holding up his glass.

The minotaur took the ice-encrusted mug in one hand, and produced a napkin with the other. He wiped the rim free of Cooper's spit, and took a sip. He paused, and then took another.

"That is rather refreshing," he conceded. Only then did he seem to notice the quiet faces in the immediate vicinity staring up at him. He slammed the mug down on the table and took hold of Cooper's ear again.

"Hey!" Cooper shouted as the bartender lifted him to a standing position by the ear.

"No magic in the bar!" the bartender roared, kicking Cooper in the ass. He picked up Julian's limp body in one hand, and a very surprised looking Tim in the other. "Take your dead amigo and your daughter with you!"

"Hey, wait!" cried Tim. "I'm not –" Whatever the rest of his protest was supposed to be, it came out as beery vomit running down the minotaur's furry arm.

The minotaur tossed Tim at Dave, and used Julian to wipe the vomit off his arm before tossing him to Cooper.

"We're really very sorry." Dave's voice shook as he spoke.

"Get out!" bellowed the minotaur, taking a threatening step forward.

Dave and Cooper hurried toward the front entrance. Ravenus flew

past them and slammed into the door frame. He landed hard on the floor and stumbled the rest of the way out the door. Once they were all outside and door was closed behind them, they stopped to catch their breath.

Dave set Tim down on his feet, but Tim didn't appear to be ready for that just yet. So Dave led him to a nice wall that he could lean against. "Nice going, Coop. Now what are we supposed to do?"

"Quit your fucking moaning for once," said Cooper. "Look at the bright side. At least he didn't charge us for the beer, right?"

"Charge us for the..." Dave shouted. "Are you kidding me? All our stuff is still in there, including our money!"

Cooper hefted Julian to his other shoulder and scratched his nose. "Yeah, that is a problem." He thought for a moment, and held Julian's body out toward Dave. "Here, hold this. I'll go talk to the guy and ask for our shit back."

"Are you out of your tiny mind?" asked Dave. "If he sees you again, he'll just flat out murder you. Remember your Charisma score? People get pissed off just being near you. And don't even try to tell me there isn't any shit on your barstool."

Cooper turned his head away and set Julian on the ground against the wall. "There may have been some residue that wiped off. What's your Charisma score?"

"Not high enough to alter someone's feelings toward me favorably. We need Julian. Splash some water on his face or something."

They looked around. The street was dry.

Cooper lifted the front of his loincloth. "I'll piss on him."

"Jesus, Cooper!" shouted Dave. "Put that thing –"

The bar door opened, and the entrance was dominated by a monstrous silhouette. Hooved feet, furry body, and horned head. "Hey."

"Listen, sir," said Dave. "We're really very sorry. We were just about to leave, but we –"

"What the fuck is the half-orc doing to the elf?" asked the bartender.

"Huh?" said Cooper. He looked down and hurriedly tucked his cock under his loincloth. "Nothin."

The minotaur stepped out into the street and kicked the door closed behind him. He had all of their bags in one hand and held a stool out as far as he could ahead of him with the thumb and forefinger of his other hand. He flung the stool over to the other side of the street, where it smashed to pieces against the wall of an alchemist.

"Listen guys," said the bartender. "I know you didn't mean any harm in there. And I'll admit the cold beer was nice. It's just that I've got to put on a show. I can't look like I'm soft on magic in my bar. It's

one thing for people to settle their differences with fists and swords, but once you let a little bit of magic creep in, pretty soon you've got guys throwing fireballs around, and the whole place is destroyed. Take that shit outside, you know?"

"Yes," said Dave. "Well that's very understanding of you."

The minotaur held their bags out. "Here's all your stuff." His brow furrowed. "I noticed that you didn't have enough money in your coin pouch to pay for everything you drank."

"Really?" said Dave meekly.

The minotaur glared at Cooper. "Or the stool you ruined."

"Again," said Dave. "I'm so sorry. If there's any –"

"Don't sweat it," said the bartender. "I took one of your crossbows as payment."

"Well," said Dave. "That was very..." the minotaur was looking down at him, as if daring him to complain. "Way to take the initiative."

"I didn't think there would be a problem," said the minotaur.

"Listen. I'm going to send you boys off with a little advice."

Dave swallowed, hoping silently that advice wasn't a metaphor for something violent. "Yes?"

"There's a tavern not far from here that caters to your kind."

"And what kind is that?"

"Weirdos, outcasts, misfits... the sort of people who just don't seem to fit in with normal society. It's called The Horsehead Tavern. It's in the Collapsed Sewer District. Ask around." He opened the door and started to walk inside.

"Hey," said Dave. "One more thing."

The minotaur's nostrils flared. "What?"

"There's a girl at the bar. She –"

The minotaur snorted. "Yeah, yeah. I'll tell her where you've gone."

"Okay, thanks!" said Dave to a closed door.

Chapter 2

"Come on, man," Cooper groaned. "We've been walking around here for like an hour now. I'm starting to sober up. It's like all the beer I drank earlier is going to waste. I'm going to have to start all over again, and who knows what time last call is around here?"

"Just keep your eyes open for a place called The Horsehead Tavern," said Dave.

"I can't read, asshole."

"Well then, I don't know. Just look for a sign with a picture of a horse's head or something."

"Are you sure we're even in the right neighborhood?"

"The bartender said it's in the Collapsed Sewer District. Don't you think this area meets that description?"

Cooper had to admit the place seemed a touch more lower-class than where they had just come from, what with smelling like shit, and most of the buildings having been constructed, from the look of them, out of salvaged pieces of other buildings, carriages, and particularly durable pieces of garbage. It just wasn't the sort of thing he noticed. He'd delivered pizzas to worse neighborhoods than this.

"Blegh," said Julian. "Put me down."

Cooper set Julian on the ground and held his shoulders until he looked like he was able to stand on his own. "Sorry," he said. "We got kicked out of the last bar. I had to carry you."

"Did you have to carry me in such a way that my face was right next to your... hey, do you have a tail?"

"I'm not sure what that is. Some kind of growth. It itches."

Julian shuddered. "So where are we going?"

"We're looking for some place called the Horse Head Inn."

"So what are we waiting for? It's right behind you."

"Huh?" said Dave, spinning around.

Cooper's looked at where Julian was pointing, but he couldn't make out what the sign said. Above it was a carved wooden head of a woman. She might have been pretty if not for the scowl on her face and the clown makeup painted on her. "What does the sign say, Dave?"

Dave swallowed. "The Whore's Head Inn."

Cooper slapped him in the back of the head. "We must have passed this place a dozen times."

"Sorry," said Dave. "I was looking for something to do with horses. I didn't notice this place. It doesn't even look like it's open."

"It's open," said Julian. "I can hear people inside."

"I can't hear anything," said Cooper.

Julian tugged on the points of his giant ears.

"Screw this," said Tim. He stepped up and banged on the door with his little fist. He didn't stop banging until something moved on the other side. It was the sound of wood scraping against stone, like someone was moving a crate up next to the door. A small window slid open about a foot and a half above Tim's head, framing a neatly trimmed goatee, a bulbous nose, and pair of narrowed brown eyes beneath a set of wild black eyebrows.

"Where are you from?" said the man, if that's what he was.

"The Shire?" said Tim.

The man on the other side of the door laughed dismissively and shook his head. "Fuck off, guys. This is a private club."

"Wait!" said Dave.

The man gave Dave a look that suggested that the next few words out of his mouth had better be earth shattering.

"We're from Gulfport, Mississippi."

The man smiled down at Dave. "Well that *is* interesting. Hang on a sec." The window in the door slammed shut.

The door opened to reveal a humanoid creature about the same height as Tim, but with a little more girth and a fuller face. He reached out a plump hand to Dave. "I'm Frank, from Atlanta."

Dave stared back dumbfounded until Tim elbowed him in the waist. "Oh," he said, accepting the handshake. "I'm Dave."

Ravenus perched on Cooper's head, probably to get a better view. The feathery fucker was pushing his luck. Cooper swatted at him, but only managed to slap himself in the head, as Ravenus used him as a springboard to fly into the dark rafters above.

They were led into the entrance of a tavern that Cooper suspected had only just turned so silent. At least two dozen pairs of eyes were focused squarely on the four of them.

"Dave, party of four!" Frank announced.

"Four?" Tim muttered. "Wait a second," he said more loudly. "Where's Katherine?"

"She's still back at the other bar," said Dave. "She wasn't with us when we got thrown out. But I told the bartender to send her this way. She'll be along soon."

"So..." Frank from Atlanta rubbed his chin. "You've survived this long in a party of five. Impressive."

"Six," said Dave. "She's got that bard guy with her too."

"Imported or domestic?"

"Whatever's on tap," said Cooper.

Frank looked up at him. "No, stupid. I'm talking about the bard. Is he a local, or is he someone that came from..." He nodded his head.

"You know, Earth?"

"Oh, right," said Dave. "Yeah, he's from Earth, just like the rest of us."

"Tony the Elf!" shouted Frank.

An elf stood up from a nearby table. "Yeah, Frank?"

"Take over door duty. I'm gonna break in the new guys. You can expect a couple more coming along shortly."

He led them to the table which Tony the Elf had just left. "What can I get you fellas to drink?"

"Beer," said Cooper, Tim, and Julian simultaneously.

"Do you have any stonepiss?" asked Dave.

"Sure thing, big guy."

Frank glanced over at the bar, and a very nervous looking elf nodded.

"New kid," said Frank. "NPC."

"What's NPC?" asked Julian.

"Non Player Character," Frank explained. "One of the locals. Sometimes it can be fun to interact with them. They can never put their finger on what's different about us, but they all think we're weird as fuck. Personally, I believe it's the racism inherent in the game. I mean look at us. An elf, a halfling, a dwarf, a half-orc, and a gnome, all sitting around shooting the shit together. That's so fucking bizzarro to them."

"Is that what you are?" asked Julian. "A gnome?"

Dave slapped Julian in the arm.

"What?" said Julian. "I'm sorry. Was that offensive?"

Frank waved a hand dismissively. "Nah, who gives a fuck? That's just what I'm talking about, right? Yeah, I'm a gnome. What of it, right?"

The elf from the bar averted his eyes as he served the drinks.

Tim, Dave, and Julian mumbled thank you's. Cooper tried to say "Thank you", but it came out as a long and satisfying belch from the bottom of his stomach. The elf wavered on his feet, looking as though he was trying to keep himself from passing out and/or crying.

"Sorry," said Cooper.

Frank accepted his own beer and flipped a copper coin up at the elf who caught it eagerly between his hand and the beer tray. He bowed low at Frank, and then immediately hurried away when Frank waved him back to the bar.

"Um..." said Cooper. "Do you mind if my friend frosts my beer?"

Frank snorted and looked up at Cooper. "Hey. Where does a twelve hundred pound gorilla get his beer frosted?"

Cooper squinted his eyes and turned his head quizzically. He had never had much patience for riddles, and his low Intelligence score wasn't doing him any favors.

Frank slapped a palm down on the table. "Wherever the fuck he wants to! Ha! Am I right?"

"So..." said Cooper, hoping for a straight answer.

"Knock yourself out, Goliath."

Cooper looked at Julian. Julian pointed a finger at Cooper's glass and looked at Frank, waiting for him to object. Frank merely raised his eyebrows curiously.

"Ice ice baby," said Julian. A ray of blue light shone from Julian's finger to Cooper's mug, which immediately frosted over with a thin coating of ice.

"Holy shit!" said Frank.

"Oh fuck," said Cooper, putting his hands over his ears. His right ear was still tender from where the minotaur had grabbed it.

"I'm sorry," said Julian. "I didn't mean to. I didn't think you'd –"

"Goliath, swap with me before that touches those big lips of yours." Frank swapped his own beer with Cooper's before Cooper knew what was happening. He took a sip, and closed his eyes in ecstasy. "Do you assholes know how long it's been since I've had a cold beer?"

"It was just a zero level spell."

"What spell?"

"Ray of Frost."

Frank shouted at another table. "Why didn't any of you other fuckers ever think of this?" A portly human woman, a half-elf, and another gnome stared back blankly. "Come on over. Meet the new guys."

The other group pushed their table against Cooper's. Frank climbed on top of the table, where he barely managed to stand taller than everyone else.

"Guys, this is my new friend Dave." He walked across to the other table and stopped in front of the human woman. "This is Rhonda." He moved on to the half-elf. "This is Ed, and the gnome here is Gorgonzola." Cooper grinned. The gnome lowered his head.

"I'm Tim," said Tim. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Julian removed his sombrero and bowed his head slightly. "Julian."

"I'm Cooper," said Cooper, punctuating his introduction with a small, moist fart.

"What the hell did you roll for Charisma?" said Rhonda.

Cooper's face hardened. "You're not so hot yourself, Deep Dish."

Rhonda's stool scraped against the stone floor as she stood up suddenly. She threw her drink in Cooper's face and turned to Frank. "I want that one out of here." She stomped off toward the bar.

Cooper licked as much of the liquid from his face as the length of his tongue would allow. "Fruity."

Julian punched Cooper in the arm. "Can you keep that big trap of

yours shut for just a second?"

"Don't sweat it," said Frank. "Rhonda'll get over it. She's just a little sensitive is all. She chose to be a human, and the stats she rolled just happened to be pretty spot on to her actual self."

"So?" said Cooper.

Frank sighed. "So when you insult her character, you're not far off from insulting the real her." He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Apparently, she's a fat uppity bitch in real life as well." He clapped his hands together and spoke aloud again. "So, when are you boys from?"

"Excuse me?" said Julian.

"How long have you been here, and what was the date back on Earth when you made the crossover?"

"We've only been here a few days," said Tim, his gaze fixed on the front entrance. The better part of a week maybe. It was June 16th when we left."

Frank hopped down onto his chair and slammed a fist down on the table. "Dammit!" he said. Tim jumped. The soft din of neighboring conversations came to a halt. Frank closed his eyes and took a few deliberate breaths. "Four more fucking months."

Heads hung low at nearby tables as patrons stared gloomily into their drinks.

The half-elf called Ed spoke up. "Our real lives are just flying by without us. Most of us are probably presumed dead."

Cooper drained his glass in one giant swig, let loose an impressive belch, and scratched an armpit. "Mordred can suck on my nuts."

"Jesus Christ, man!" Frank shouted, grabbing the edge of the table as if to keep it from going anywhere. His eyes scanned back and forth across the ceiling. Ed fell off of his stool. Gorgonzola ducked his head under the table.

"What the fuck is wrong with you guys?" said Cooper.

After a few second passed without incident, Frank's eyes shifted from terror to anger. He pointed a pudgy finger at Cooper. "Rule number one in here, Bucko. You keep your thoughts and opinions of the Cavern Master to yourself. Got it?"

"Why?" asked Cooper.

"Because it took us a long time to pool together enough money to buy this dump, and I'd rather it not get swarmed with bees, or set on fire, or hit by an asteroid, or whatever, just because some giant moron couldn't keep his trap shut. I don't know if you've noticed, but Mordred doesn't respond well to being insulted."

Cooper stretched his lips back in a wide toothy grin and stood up. He helped himself to his former frosty beer mug, downed the half that Frank hadn't finished yet, and tapped on the side of the glass with a

claw until he had the room's full attention. He set the glass down on the table and cupped his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice. He shouted at the ceiling.

"Mordred's skank whore of a mother can bathe forever in an ocean of my ass sweat!"

There were a number of gasps and at least one giggle, but most of the patrons simply stared up at Cooper in horrified silence.

Frank climbed on top of the table to stand face to face with Cooper. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? Are you trying to get us all killed?"

Cooper stepped away from Frank to address his now captive audience. "Ladies, gentlemen, whatever the fuck you are," he said, pointing to a curly-haired halfling who was either an ugly female, or a dude with man tits. "You are no longer under Mordred's oppressive yoke!"

Julian stood up. "Cooper, maybe this isn't the best time to –"

"Are you drinking that?" Cooper picked up the shot glass in front of a wide-eyed dwarf at a nearby table and knocked it back. "Fuck me, that's the stuff." He slammed down the glass. "Today marks the first day of your freedom, brethren!"

Tim stood up next to Julian. "Shut the fuck up, Cooper. We want to ease them into this."

"What's Shirley Temple talking about?" asked Frank. "Just what the hell is going on here?"

"I'll tell you what's going on," said Cooper, scooping up Tim in one arm and mussing up his hair with the other hand. "My little friend Tim here, who has more brains in his little head than I have in my giant ass, has solved your Mordred problem."

"Oh yeah?" said Frank. "And how's that?"

"He killed him."

Tim threw up.

"Jesus H. Christ," said Frank. He waved at the elf bartender, who immediately produced a bucket and mop from behind the bar and scuttled toward the mess. He turned back to Cooper.

"Thank you. That's really fucking hilarious. You ought to take that act on the road. Like, right now."

"Do I sound like I'm fucking around?" said Cooper. "It's over. He's gone."

"Tell me, please. How did he do it? Did he slap him to death with his little halfling dick?"

"Of course not," said Cooper. "That would be ridiculous."

Frank sighed. "Hold on a tick. I think I know what's going on here. So he set you guys up against some big bad, right? And he breaks character during the fight, and you think you're fighting the real

Mordred. And then little Tim here gets in a lucky sneak attack and brings the thing down, right? Well I've got news for you, buddy. That wasn't Mordred. You can't fight the Cavern Master."

"Yes!" said Julian. "That's precisely what happened. Cooper, you're such a dumbass. How could we have thought that was Mordred?" He let out a weak laugh through a pleading smile.

"My balls that's what happened!" said Cooper. "Tim lured that fat fuck into his walk-in freezer with the promise of Popsicles. The safety latch is broken, so he got stuck in there."

Frank's shoulders went limp while he processed what Cooper had said. "Oh my god, you guys are serious. You really killed him."

Tim managed to throw up one more stringy gob of spit.

A new din of excited chatter erupted in the tavern. Some of it was made up of laughter and clinking glasses. More of it was made up of panicked questions.

The half-elf called Ed stood up. "You stupid sons of bitches!" he said. "I haven't seen my kids in nearly a year. Now I'm never going to see them again!"

The laughter and clinking of glasses came to a sudden halt. The panicked questions grew into angry murmurs and a bit of crying.

"We all got people we miss from back home," said Tony the Elf, still standing at the entrance. "This doesn't change nothin. You know as well as I do that Mordred was never gonna let us come back."

"We don't know that," Frank snapped back at him. "Who knows what might have happened? He might have gotten picked up by the police for something else and copped a deal by solving three dozen missing persons cases in an afternoon. He might have found Jesus. He might have gotten fucking laid and decided to lighten up. We know two things. We know that Mordred was our only ticket back, and we know that any chance we might have had to go home is now gone."

Several of the patrons stood up and took a threatening step toward Cooper and Tim. Cooper took a step back and ran into Julian who was doing the same. This was not the reaction from the crowd that Cooper had been anticipating.

Frank hopped onto the floor and held the mob at bay with his raised hand. "Just tell me why. What the fuck were you thinking?"

Tim was unable to answer. The expression on his face suggested that the reason for this was a combination of terror, shame, and Cooper's stench. Cooper, who had been expecting cheers and booze, stood frozen and speechless.

Dave spoke up in Tim's defense. "He was trying to force Mordred into a position where he had to negotiate. He didn't know that Mordred needed the dice to bring us back. The fat bastard was about to murder us!"

Frank lowered his head. "It was a clever plan. I'll give you that. But it doesn't leave us any less fucked."

"Maybe it does," said Julian.

"Like fuck it does!" shouted a dwarf standing at the front of the mob. "I'm going to beat the shit out of you."

"Sit down, Andy," said Frank. "Nobody is going to beat the shit out of anybody until we talk this through. What's on your mind, elf?"

Julian swallowed hard. "Well, the dice were magical, right?"

"Okay, sure. So what?"

"Julian," said Dave. "They're already pissed off enough." He addressed Frank. "This was his first time playing the game. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Hey Dave," said Cooper.

"What?"

"Shut your face."

"I was just –"

"Goliath is right," said Frank. "We can't afford to dismiss any ideas right now. Keep talking, elf."

"I was just thinking, if the dice were created once, they could be created again, right? Where are we better suited to make a set of magic dice? On Earth, or in a world where I can do this?" He spun his hands around one another, and a dozen glowing butterflies fluttered out of his hands and disappeared in a mist of sparkles.

"So fucking gay," said Cooper.

"What level are you, elf?" asked Frank.

"I've got a level in wizard and a level in sorcerer."

Frank laughed and shook his head. Some of the angry mob laughed as well. "Do you know how much experience you'll have to gain to become powerful enough to make dice like that?"

"A lot?"

"Yeah, it's a fucking lot. And do you know how you gain experience points?"

"Killing monsters?"

"That's right," said Frank. "Killing monsters that are as tough as you or tougher. That means that your life is always in danger. Are you willing to risk your life, I mean *really* risk your life, every day, for a chance that maybe someday you can figure out how to get back home?"

"No, probably not."

"We stay in this tavern because it's a dangerous fucking world out there. We don't want to die, and we can't just go out into the woods in a giant mob and start killing shit. You don't get any experience if the odds are that much in your favor, and we don't want to risk anyone's life. So we're stuck."

"We don't need to do it ourselves," said Julian. "Can't we just go to a tower and pay some wizard to teleport us back home?"

"Do you honestly think that never occurred to any of us? You're forgetting, all of the NPC wizards in town are controlled by..." Frank looked up at Julian with wild excitement in his eyes.

"You were about to say...?"

Frank grinned. "Not bad for a noob."

The tavern erupted in a fit of excited murmuring.

Tony the Elf walked hurriedly up to Frank. "There's a girl outside looking for a dwarf named Dave. I think she's a local."

"Like hell she is," said Tim, making for the front door. "That's my sister." Dave and Tony the elf followed after him.

Tony pulled the door open. The silhouette standing in the doorway was far too short and stocky to be that of a half-elf.

"Who the hell is this?" asked Tim. "Where's Katherine?"

"Who's Katherine?" said the dwarf girl in the doorway.

"Jorn?" said Dave. "What are you doing here?"

"The bartender at the Piss Bucket said you asked for me. He sent me over here."

"Shit," said Dave. Jorn's cautious frown turned into a scowl.

"What's going on, Dave?" asked Tim impatiently.

"I told the bartender to send over the girl that was with us. I'd been talking to Jorn at the bar, so he must have thought I meant her."

"Jesus, Dave!" shouted Tim. "You couldn't have been a little more specific? I don't know, maybe mention that you were talking about the girl *without* the beard? What –"

Jorn punched Tim in the mouth.

The room went silent, except for a few suppressed giggles, while Tim regained his bearings. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. It came away bloody.

"Why you big hairy bitch!"

The next punch sent him crashing into a chair. He scrambled to get up, but Cooper rested a gentle, though forceful, hand on his shoulder, sitting him down in the chair.

"I'm really sorry about that," said Dave. "He's just worried about his sister."

"Excuse me, Love," said Frank, stepping up to address Jorn. "What tavern did you just come from?"

"Piss Bucket," said Jorn.

"Tony the Elf," said Frank. "You know where that place is, right?"

"Yeah, it's in the Lantern District."

Frank turned to Tim. "Have you chilled the fuck out yet?"

Tim lowered his head. "Yeah, I'm sorry."

"All right then. You, Papa Smurf, and Tony the Elf can escort the

young miss here back to the Piss Bucket and go find your sister. Kong and Juan Valdez can stay here.

Julian removed his sombrero. "If it's all the same to you, we should probably stick together."

"It's not all the same to me," said Frank. "I've got some more questions I'd like to run by you. And if I'm being completely honest, I think it's safe to assume that some of us have some trust issues with your group. You waltz into our bar and announce that you've killed the CM. I don't think it's in our best interest to let you all out of our sight at once."

"So we're hostages?"

"Call it what you want. If by 'hostage' you mean that you're being kept here in accordance with or against your will until certain demands are met, then yes, you are hostages."

"Well when you put it like that, –"

"But you should really consider yourselves very fortunate guests. It took a lot of sweat and blood to acquire this place, and it's the safest place in this crazy fucked up world that you're going to find. Some of us have been stuck here for a very long time, and most of us would like to get back to our lives in the real world. You guys may have fucked that up for us, or you may have taken the first step toward making that a real possibility. But we're all in this together, and if you're gonna survive long enough to put some kind of plan into motion, this is the place you're gonna wanna hang that big fucking hat of yours."

"What do you think, Cooper?"

"I think I'd like a beer."

"Fine," said Julian. "Can I at least send Ravenus with them?"

"Who the fuck is Ravenus?"

Julian tucked his sombrero under one arm and held out the other. "Ravenus!"

A flurry of black feathers erupted out of a dark corner of the tavern and landed on Julian's arm. "He's my familiar. Ravenus, this is Frank." The bird screeched and cawed.

Frank clapped his hands over his ears. "Jesus Christ!"

"I know, right?" said Cooper.

Julian frowned. "I take it you don't speak Elven?"

"Tony the Elf," said Frank. "It's your call. Do you want to take the bird?"

"Yeah that's fine, so long as he stays out of sight and doesn't cause any trouble."

Julian looked at his familiar. "You hear that, Ravenus? Just keep an eye on things, and report back here if anything goes wrong."

Ravenus nodded.

“All right then,” said Tony the Elf. “Frodo and Papa Smurf, was it? Please follow me. Big Bird can stay with the lady.”

“It’s Tim, actually.”

“Dave.”

“SCRRAAWWW!”

“Ravenus, eh?” said Tony the Elf. He smiled at Julian. “Clever.”

Tim and Dave followed Tony the Elf behind the bar and into the kitchen. When they returned a few moments later, Tim was armed with a shinier, sleeker version of the dagger he had been carrying, and had switched out his bulky light crossbow for a hand crossbow. Tony the Elf had two identical machetes in sheaths crisscrossed on his back. Dave still wore his same armor and carried his same mace.

“Remember,” said Tony the Elf. “Fighting is only a last resort. If you start any shit with the locals, I’ll take you fuckers down myself rather than let you bring trouble back to the Whore’s Head. All set? Good, then. Let’s go.”

They found Jorn and Ravenus waiting by the door, and the five of them exited the tavern into the night.

Chapter 3

“Me? No, I’ve never been married.” The handsome stranger with the neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard filled Katherine’s wine glass again. “To be truthful, I don’t feel I have a lot to offer a woman.”

“Oh, come on,” said Katherine, giggling. “I’m sure that’s not true.” Why was she giggling? She didn’t giggle. Was it the wine? She should probably eat something. She picked a wedge of fried potato from Chaz’s untouched dish. He had ordered it and then passed out before it arrived. Not bad. “You’re very handsome.”

He was. He was tall and slim without being gangly. He filled out his purple silk suit very nicely. And that suit. If anyone had been wearing that suit in Mississippi, they would have either been taken for a pimp or laughed out of the bar. This guy, though – and only this guy – might have been able to get away with it.

“Oh, sure,” said the man. “I’m handsome, and charming, and I’ve got a bit of money and a house, and –”

“And you’re so modest!”

They laughed together at that. Katherine honked out a laugh like an asthmatic goose. What was wrong with her? She clapped her hands over her face.

“You’re very funny,” he said.

Katherine put her palms on the pointed tips of her ears, trying to will away the warmth in them. “I have my moments. So what is it you think you don’t have to offer a woman?”

“Intimacy.” He took a sip from his own goblet. It wasn’t like the cheap glass that Katherine was drinking from. She guessed it was a special cup the owner kept behind the bar for his more high-profile clientele. “I value my privacy. A woman is like a dog, in constant need of attention.” He reached a hand down to pat Butterbean. The wolf growled at him. He smiled and moved his hand away.

“Hush, Butterbean!” snapped Katherine. *Hold on... A woman is like a dog?* She looked up into the man’s cloudy grey eyes. “You’re so right.” She put her elbow up on the bar and rested her head on her hand. “But you don’t seem so private to me.”

The man smiled. “No. Indeed not. I must seem talkative to the point of rudeness. I offer my humble apologies. Look. I’ve talked your friend there into a coma.”

“No. That wasn’t you. He shouldn’t have been drinking. He’s having some trouble with his um... Constitution?”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s all right,” said Katherine. “Dave says he’ll regain one point back for every day he rests.”

"I must admit that I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, it's all pretty new to me as well."

"You are a fascinating creature."

"You're pretty fascinating yourself."

"Why don't you come back to my place? I've got a bottle of wine at home made from berries that can only be found in the Grimblood mountains."

"Sounds great!"

"We can bring your friend along as well."

"Okay." Katherine stood up. "Come on, Butterbean."

"I'm sorry," said the man. "The wolf will have to stay behind." He stared into Katherine's eyes. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Katherine faltered. "No, I... I guess not. Stay here, Butterbean. I'll come back for you."

Butterbean laid his head on the floor and whimpered.

"Barman, my coach."

The giant red haired monster behind the bar bowed his horned head slightly. "Right away, sir." He shot a look over at a – whatever those short people were called. Tim was one. He dropped the mop he was holding and ran out the door.

"And," the man in the purple suit waited until he had the bartender's attention again. "Would you mind?"

"Of course, sir." The beast picked up Chaz's unconscious body by the arm and carried him to the entrance of the tavern like a Hefty bag.

Katherine and the man in the purple suit followed the beast outside. After a minute or two, a small black carriage pulled up, drawn by the most horrific looking horse Katherine had ever seen. Its lips were drawn back, exposing an incomplete set of yellowed, rotten teeth poking out of thin, black gums. Its milky white eyes didn't appear to be focused on anything in particular. Its skin was mottled with patches of grey hair and clung tightly to its bones. The poor thing looked emaciated. In spite of its appearance, the horse trotted forward as if it were in the prime of its well-fed youth.

Katherine took a step back as the horse clopped by her. The man in the purple suit put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and turned her to the waiting carriage. The little man hopped out and stepped out of the way. The purple suited man helped Katherine into the carriage, and then followed after her. The red monster tossed Chaz down on the seat opposite them.

"Home," the man called out. The carriage immediately started moving.

As the carriage pulled away, Katherine heard the big bartender let out a sigh. If she hadn't known any better, she would have thought it was a sigh of relief.

Chapter 4

“So,” Julian addressed Frank. “I guess everyone’s story in here is pretty much the same?”

“What on earth would make you guess that?”

“I mean, we all must have pissed off Mordred at some point in order to get sent over here, right?”

“Oh,” Frank brought his mug to his lips, but paused before he actually took a sip. He held it up to Julian. “Do you mind?”

Julian pointed a finger at the glass and bent his thumb like he was cocking the hammer of a revolver. “Cold.” A ray of blue light zapped the glass, frosting it over with ice.

Frank took a long quaff. “Fantastic,” he said. “Yeah, well that story is pretty much the same. My group, including myself, Tony the Elf, Rhonda, Stuart and Rose, were one of the first to arrive. Barney, the cook, is the only survivor we know of who got here before us.”

“Survivor?”

“Yeah. We’re pretty sure the rest of his party got killed. Don’t go poking your nose into it though. He doesn’t talk about it. In fact, he doesn’t do a whole lot of talking at all.”

“Which one’s Stuart?” asked Julian.

“He’s the human guy next to the set of half-elf tits your friend has been staring at for the past half hour.”

“Cooper!” Julian snapped.

“What?” his stare didn’t falter.

“Did you hear Frank?”

“Yeah, I’m listening. I see exactly the guy he’s talking about. The bald dude in the pajamas, right?”

“Maybe you ought to stop staring.” Even as he said it, Julian caught his own gaze being pulled in by the magnificently full breasts, tastefully pushed together by the shiny steel Wonderbra which barely managed to contain them.

The half-elf woman wrapped the translucent shawl she wore more tightly around her, but that only served to divert Julian’s attention down to her exposed navel and the metal panties which did little but define where her long, slender legs began.

The gravitational pull of her body to Julian’s eyes was broken when the bald guy stepped directly in front of him.

“Is there a problem here?”

“Huh? No,” said Julian. He offered his hand to shake. “My name is Julian. And you must be –”

“Stuart.” The bald guy spared Julian’s hand a cursory glance, but

made no move to shake it. "You're making my wife very uncomfortable."

"I'm really sorry," said Julian. "I've just never seen such a... She's..." While scrambling for the least offensive thing to say, he became aware that Cooper hadn't yet stopped staring. "Cooper!" he said. No response. "Cooper, knock it off." He punched Cooper in the small of the back.

"Wha?" said Cooper. "Whoa," he said to Stuart. "Where the fuck did you come from?"

"This is Stuart," said Julian. "He would appreciate it if you'd stop leering at *his wife*."

"Oh, sorry," said Cooper. "But honestly. If she doesn't want to be stared at, she really shouldn't walk around with her titties hanging out like that."

Stuart stepped right up in Cooper's face. His nose twitched and his eyes began to water. Julian had been that close to Cooper before, and knew that Stuart must be using all of his Willpower to refrain from stepping back or vomiting. "Are you trying to tell my wife how she should dress?" he said when he was able to choke out the words. "You, who wears nothing but the decrepit flesh of some diseased animal around your waist! Why don't you cover up your own *titties*?" He spat out the last word as if he found it beneath him.

"These are all muscle, you bald little bas—"

"I think," Julian spoke up loudly enough to shut Cooper up. Once that was accomplished, he spoke at a more reasonable volume. "I think what my friend was trying to say is that you have a lovely wife. We mean no disrespect, and will make an effort to keep from gawking in the future. But be realistic, man. All that bare skin makes it kind of hard to look away. She's wearing metallic lingerie, for crying out loud."

"It's armor," said Stuart. The sigh that followed told Julian that this wasn't the first time Stuart had traveled down this road. "She's a fighter, but she rolled a natural Charisma score of 18. We've tried putting her in man's armor, but it just doesn't fit properly."

"That's preposterous," said Julian. "What kind of attack could she possibly hope to defend herself from with that?"

Stuart raised his eyebrows. "You'd be surprised. We don't get into too many fights, but when we do, the attackers' weapons always seem to hit her somewhere in the twelve square inches of armor she wears."

"Incredible," said Julian, shaking his head.

Stuart shrugged. "It's just part of the game. Have you seen some of those book covers?"

"So, um..." said Cooper. "Just to be clear. It's okay to look then? I mean, I won't make a move or nothin'. Just fill the spank bank, you

know?”

Stuart’s angry face switched back on like a light when he turned to Cooper. “How’s this for clear? If I catch you so much as glancing in my wife’s general direction, I’ll carve out your eyes while you sleep and fill the sockets with your testicles.”

Cooper frowned. “Dude, that’s kinda fucked up.”

Chapter 5

“Why do they call you Tony the Elf?” asked Dave as he, Jorn, and Tim struggled on their short legs to keep up with the long, graceful strides of the Ranger through the dark streets of the city.

“My name is Tony, and I’m an elf.”

“Nobody calls me ‘Dave the Dwarf’.”

“When we made our characters, Mordred told us that we needed character names. I didn’t feel like thinking up some stupid unpronounceable name with a bunch of Qs and Vs and apostrophes in it, so I just called myself Tony the Elf. Mordred, as you know, takes the game a bit more seriously than that. We didn’t make it three sessions before he sent us over.”

“Our group didn’t make it thirty minutes,” said Tim.

Tony the Elf laughed. “You guys must have been some serious assholes.” He leaned back against the side of a building and poked his head around a corner. “Let’s go.”

“Why are we being so sneaky?” asked Jorn. “Who are we supposed to be hiding from?”

“No offense,” said Tony the Elf. “But we’re hiding from people like you.”

She looked at Dave, and then back at Tony the Elf. “Like me in what way exactly?”

“Locals. You’ve probably noticed that we behave kind of strangely.”

“Well I weren’t gonna say nothing, but yeah. I’ve noticed some peculiarities here and there.”

Tony the Elf addressed Dave and Tim. “Learn this lesson as quickly as possible. Keep your distance from the locals. The cultural differences between us and them are vast. You never know when a seemingly innocuous word or gesture is going to set someone off and make them want to murder you.”

“We’ve kind of learned that lesson already,” said Dave, “when our friend Cooper chopped the head off a city guard.”

“Jesus!”

“It was before we got sent over.”

Tony the Elf shook his head. “It’s no wonder you guys didn’t last thirty minutes. Anyway, that’s not a good example at all because chopping people’s heads off is frowned upon in our culture as well. All clear, let’s move.” He led the party down the quiet empty street. Tim followed close behind him. Jorn followed behind Tim, with Dave taking up the rear. Somewhere above them, Ravenus circled in the dark sky.

“So what’s a good example?” whispered Tim. “Like when Dave’s

girlfriend beat the shit out of me for mentioning her beard?"

Jorn slapped Tim in the back of the head.

"No, dammit!" said Tony the Elf. "Did you ever talk to women back home?"

"Not ones with beards." That earned him a harder slap. "Fucking hell, knock it off!"

"You did that one fat girl in high school," said Dave. "Carrie. She had a bit of a mustache."

"Who?"

Dave laughed. "Don't even pretend you don't remember. The party at Pete Alderman's house. You were both wasted."

"Shit," said Tim. "I remember."

"You thought you were being sneaky doing it in the bathroom, but there was a line of people waiting to piss when you came out."

"All right already! I said I remember. And sure, she was a little chunky, but she didn't have a mustache."

"Sure she did," said Dave. "Why do you think everyone called her Hairy Carrie?"

"I thought they were calling her Hari Kari because she was suicidal."

"She was suicidal?"

"I don't know. I only assumed that because everyone was calling her Hari Kari."

Tony the Elf stopped walking and turned around. "Hold on a sec. You took advantage of a drunk girl who you thought to be suicidal?"

Tim's face took on the look of someone who Matlock had badgered into confessing in the courtroom. "I... she..."

"You disgust me," said Tony the Elf. He turned his back to Tim and started walking again.

"I was the victim here!" said Tim. "You think I would have done that sober?"

"This must be one of those cultural differences," said Jorn. "This all sounds very much like typical dwarven courting ritual."

"We're getting near the Piss Bucket," said Tony the Elf. "The first person to talk before we get there is getting stabbed in the face."

They continued along without speaking, but only made it about twenty yards further down the street when the silence was broken by the pained howl of a dog from a side street up ahead.

"What was that?" asked Jorn.

"Nothing," Tony the Elf answered just a bit too abruptly. "Probably just two dogs fighting over a scrap of meat."

Tim and Dave exchanged a dubious glance. As a rogue, Tim was better equipped to tell when someone was bullshitting him, but Dave didn't need a Sense Motive check to know that Tony the Elf was

blowing smoke up their asses. If anyone else had been fooled, it wasn't for long.

"Stupid animal!" The voice was deep and guttural. Dave guessed half-orc. "See how you like it." This was followed by another pained howl.

A closed tavern with a low garden wall occupied the street corner up ahead. Dave, Tim, and Jorn ran toward the wall to see what was going on.

"Wait!" said Tony the Elf. "Stop!" They ignored him.

Dave peeked over the wall. The dog in question was filthy and shaggy. It was a sheepdog, or else one of its parents was an old mop. It lay on its side in the middle of the street. The only indication it was still alive was the matted fur moving up and down as it breathed. The half-orc who stood over it wiped his boot over the dog's body, leaving behind a streak of brown.

"That'll teach you to take a dump in my path," he growled at the dog.

"Ease up," said the elf next to him. "I think the pooch has learned his lesson." He took a swig from a glass bottle, and then poured some of the contents on the dog's face. "Here poochie. Have a drink." The dog didn't respond.

"Looks like the poor thing's all tuckered out," said the half-orc. "Light up his tail and see if that stirs anything in him."

The elf laughed. "Good idea."

"What are they doing to that dog?" Jorn whispered.

"Let's just get out of here," said Tony the Elf. His voice was almost pleading, but nobody moved.

The elf conjured a small fireball the size of a billiard ball, and threw it at the dog's tail. He missed by a couple of inches, and the flame fizzled out in a puddle.

"Idiot," the half-orc said with a snort. "You're so wasted."

"Wasted?" Tim whispered. "Do people around here say..." He looked up at Tony. "Hang on. Are those assholes some of ours?"

"I'll explain later," said Tony the Elf. "Right now we just need to get out of here. Trust me on this."

"What?" said Jorn. "And let them torture that poor dog to death? What kind of men are you?" She gave Dave a particularly vicious glare. "What kind of dwarf are you? Your fathers would weep to see you now." She stood up and stepped out into the street.

"Shit," said Tony the Elf. "They'll kill her."

Dave started to move toward Jorn, but it was too late.

"You there!" Jorn shouted. "What sorry excuses for men are you who would take pleasure in the pain of this defenseless animal?"

The half-orc and the elf turned around.

"Well well," said the half-orc. "Looky looky what we've got here."

"First!" said the elf. The half-orc shot him an annoyed glare, but then gave him a grudging nod. The elf took a quick swig from his bottle. "Ain't been with a dwarf yet."

They walked toward Jorn.

Jorn unstrapped the war-hammer at her side. The half-orc unsheathed a sword that must have weighed more than Tim.

"Remember," said the elf. He sounded almost giddy. "Flat of the blade. And don't beat her up too much until after I've been."

"Calm down, man," said the half-orc. "I know what I'm doing."

"I'm sorry," said Dave. "I can't let this happen." He stood up straight.

"Wait!" said Tony the Elf. "Fuck!"

Dave didn't wait, and neither did Tim. Local or not. He wasn't going to hide behind a wall while these two douchenozzles raped a girl.

"Stand down," said Dave, taking a place beside Jorn. A shadow flickered across the magical light of a lamp post a short distance away. Ravenus was standing by in case things got ugly.

"We'll only give you one warning," said Tim.

The half-orc and the elf looked at one another and burst into giggles.

"Oh no!" cried the half-orc in mock distress. "The hobbit's gonna kill me with his little dagger!" He spat on the ground. "You can have the dwarf," he said to his companion. "I think the halfling's cuter anyway."

The elf laughed. "You're such a fag." He downed the last of whatever he was drinking and threw the bottle against the wall Tony the Elf was still hiding behind.

"Not another step," said Dave. He held his mace in front of him with both hands.

"Aw," said the half-orc. "That's so romantic. I'll tell you what, little guy. I'll let you watch."

"That's enough," said Tony the Elf, finally stepping out of the shadows.

The half-orc lowered his sword and stopped in his tracks. "Tony. It's so good to see you." His tone suggested otherwise. "We were just about to have a little fun with these locals."

"They're not locals," said Tony the Elf. "And you're coming dangerously close to violating our truce."

"Is that right?" asked the half-orc. "New recruits, eh? Where are you guys from?"

"Gulfport, Mississippi," said Tim. He wasn't really interested in having a conversation with these two, but anything that steered their minds away from murder and rape was a good thing.

"Me too," said Dave.

"Boorgrummel," said Jorn. "Stony Hills."

The half-orc raised an eyebrow and grinned at Tony the Elf. "Sounds like the lady's a local."

"Call it a night, Eric," said Tony the Elf.

"You're not the boss of us," said the elf, who was all but hiding behind the half-orc. "We can do whatever we want. We had a deal, remember?"

"This isn't up for discussion," said Tony the Elf in a schoolteacher tone. "Now you two go home right now."

"What if we don't wanna?" said the half-orc. "We could kill you all right now, and who's gonna know? I'm an eighth-level fighter. I can take you all out with my eyes closed."

"I wouldn't count on it," said Tony the Elf. "I just made level four. And you two are drunk. You'll take penalties to your Attack Rolls."

"What in the Abyss are you guys talking about?" asked Jorn.

The elf stepped out from behind the half-orc with a confident grin on his face. "I don't need to be accurate to fireball you dorks."

"We're standing right next to each other, dipshit," said Tony the Elf. "If you cast a Fireball, you'll burn to a crisp with the rest of us." That wiped the smug from the elf's face. "Listen. You boys can break the truce if you want to. You might even kill us all. You're higher level than we are. I get that. But I wouldn't count on you both walking away from here. You know how the game is played." He looked right at the elf. "It just makes sense for us to concentrate our attacks on the wizard first. Try not to take it personally, Scott."

The elf took his defensive position behind the half-orc once again. The half-orc made a token show of bravado, stepping up into Tony the Elf's face, but backed off easily enough when the elf tugged at his arm. "Let's go," said the elf. "Let the fags get back to jerking each other off."

"This isn't over, Tony," said the half-orc. "I'm telling Mordred about this."

They sulked off down the street. The half-orc stepped on the dog's tail as he passed. The poor thing didn't even have the strength to yelp.

Jorn started after them, but Dave was able to keep her back with his hand on her shoulder.

"Just let them go," said Dave.

"What a couple of dicks," said Tim once they were far enough away.

"They're kids," said Tony the Elf.

"They're what?" said Tim.

"Mordred ran a game for a group of middle schoolers," Tony explained. "They weren't sent here because they offended him. Just

the opposite. They thought he was the best thing ever. They stroked his ego so hard that he decided to give them a gift.”

“That’s so fucked up.”

“It’s worse than that. They don’t seem to have a fully developed sense of... well, you just saw for yourself. They’ll kick dogs in the street for fun and do whatever they want with the locals. None of us had it in us to stop them when we could, and now there’s not much we can do but stay out of their way.”

“You wouldn’t have to kill them,” said Tim. “Maybe all they need is a good beat down to put them in their place.”

Tony the Elf laughed. “And who do you propose is going to do that?”

“We could have done that just now.”

“They would have slaughtered us.”

“But you said –”

“I was bullshitting. Eric could have cut us all in half with one swing on a halfway decent roll.”

“Fuck.”

“You think it’s bad now,” said Tony the Elf. “Just wait until they figure out that Mordred isn’t around anymore. They’ll be looking for answers. Your group would do well to lay low.”

“Our group is terrible at that,” said Dave.

“Your confusing chatter pains my ears,” said Jorn. “What can be done for that poor dog?”

The four of them approached the animal. It looked to have three paws in the grave. The only signs it gave that it hadn’t crossed over already were a spasm every now and again and some labored, shallow breathing.

“I don’t think there’s much we can do,” said Tim. He pulled back a bolt on his crossbow until it clicked. “I can make it quick and easy at least.” He looked to Tony the Elf, who nodded his solemn approval.

“Nonsense,” said Dave. “I can fix this.” He knelt down next to the dog.

“No!” said Tony the Elf. “Stop!”

“I heal thee,” said Dave, stroking the matted fur on the dog’s head. “How’s that feel, little guy?”

“Oh no,” said Tony the Elf. “What have you done?” The distress in his voice seemed disproportional to whatever ill effects healing a stray dog might have.

The dog shivered and convulsed like a vibrating shag pillow. It let out a sharp bark and rose to its feet. Shaking its fur dry, it speckled Tim, Dave, and Jorn with black, liquid street filth. Tony the Elf was spared the worst of it, as he was slowly backing away. It was as if Dave had just opened a portal to Hell.

If this dog had eyes, it was a miracle that it could see through the curtain of hair that hung over them. It sniffed the air, barked loudly, wagged its knobby tail, and looked right at the still-retreating Tony the Elf.

“Shit,” said Tony. He stopped backing away, the panic on his face replaced with helpless resignation.

The dog bolted toward Tony the Elf like he was made out of bacon. Tim raised his crossbow to fire.

Tony the Elf’s eyes went wide. “No!” He tore one of the machetes off of his back and hurled it at Tim. Thankfully, it only managed to fuck up his weapon rather than sever his arm.

“What the fuck, man!”

The dog leapt into Tony’s arms and covered his face in slobber.

“Sorry,” said Tony the Elf. “I couldn’t let you shoot my dog.”

“I thought it was attacking you!”

“Dude,” said Dave. “It’s just a sheepdog. What could it have done to him?”

“I don’t know,” said Tim, still fiery mad from having just been attacked. “Maybe it was an *evil* sheepdog or something.”

“Evil sheepdog?” asked Jorn. “Are you in your right mind, boy?”

“All I know is that Tony was backing away, looking at it like it was an ex-wife out on parole early, and it was running at him.”

“That is kind of strange,” Dave admitted. “Why were you freaking out so bad over a sheepdog?”

Tony the Elf scratched the dog on its head. “It’s not just a sheepdog now. It’s my Animal Companion.”

“What?” said Tim. “How?”

“Rangers get Animal Companions at Level 4, which I just made yesterday while out boar hunting. I was going to go into the woods tomorrow and try to find something a little more badass. Maybe a wolf or an eagle or something. I wasn’t exactly looking for a stray dog.”

“Um...” said Dave. “Sorry?”

Jorn wore a broad, hairy grin. “What are you going to name him?”

“I don’t know,” said Tony the Elf. “I’ll have to think about it, but right now I’m leaning toward ‘Dave’.”

They made it the rest of the way to the Piss Bucket Tavern without incident. The tavern was quiet when they reached it, with only the tiniest hint of candlelight flickering in the windows. Ravenus flew out of the darkness and perched on the tavern sign.

Tony the Elf addressed the rest of his party. “Shut up.” He pushed the door open.

“We’re closed!” bellowed the minotaur over the sound of a broom sweeping broken glass across a rough wooden floor.

“Morty. It’s me, Tony the Elf.”

The tinkling and sweeping stopped, and a massive set of hooved feet stomped across the floor toward them. Dave took a step back.

“Tony,” said the minotaur, opening the door wider. He looked down at Dave the Dog. “Cute dog.”

“Thanks,” said Tony the Elf.

“What brings you here at this time of night?” It snorted at Tim and Dave. “I see you’ve become acquainted with my latest set of cast offs.”

“Well see, that’s the thing,” said Tony the Elf. “You didn’t send the full set.”

“Speak plainly, elf. It’s been a long night.”

“If you recall,” said Dave. “I asked you to send over a girl.”

“And so I did. She’s right next to you. I wish you a wonderful life together.”

“You sent the wrong girl,” said Tim.

The minotaur snorted. “Well that is awkward.”

“It’s not like that,” said Tim. “My sister is missing.”

“Well she hasn’t been in here.”

“I haven’t even told you what she looks like yet.”

“Listen, kid,” the beast’s patience was straining in its voice. “There haven’t been any halfling women in here tonight.”

“She’s not a halfling. She’s a half-elf.”

“She’s a what?” said Jorn.

The minotaur closed his eyes, took some deep breaths, and opened them again. “Tony, I know that you know better than to come over here at this time of night and – how do you folks put it – fuck with me?”

“Of course I know that, Morty,” said Tony the Elf. “Just like you know better than to ask questions about things that don’t make a whole lot of sense as far as our people are concerned.”

The minotaur nodded his giant horned head. “Well played, sir. I know that well.”

“Is this one of those cultural differences you were talking about?” asked Jorn.

“Absolutely,” said Tony the Elf.

“Her name is Katherine. She was sitting at the bar,” said Tim. “She was with a human Bard and a wolf named Butter-something. Butterbits... Buttermilk... Bread n’ Butter...”

The minotaur swallowed and lowered his eyes. “I don’t recall seeing anyone of that description.” He started to close the door.

“Butterbean!” shouted Tim.

A sharp bark broke the silence from within the tavern. The minotaur lowered his head and allowed the door to swing open. Butterbean padded out past him and licked Tim’s face. Tim hugged

the wolf around its neck and scratched behind its ears. He looked ecstatic... until he suddenly didn't.

"Wait a second," said Tim. "Where the hell is my sister, you hairy bast—"

Tony the Elf punched him in the gut, taking the wind out of him. He gave Tim a few seconds to breathe. "Feeling better, big guy?"

Tim nodded.

Tony the Elf stood up. "I think what my friend was trying to suggest is that you haven't been one hundred percent straightforward with us."

"Look," said the minotaur. "That's why I don't let you people in my tavern. I don't want the kind of trouble that you always tend to bring with you. All I can tell you is that she left a while ago with her bard friend and some other guy. They left some of their shit behind. Hang on a second and I'll go get it." He returned a minute later and set two backpacks on the ground at Tim's feet.

"You just let some stranger drag my sister out of here?" asked Tim.

"Nobody was dragging anybody. She looked happy enough. Now thanks for picking up the dog. Don't let me catch you around here again." The minotaur slammed the door shut.

"This is bullshit," said Tim. "She never would have left Butterbean behind. He's her Animal Companion."

"So what are you going to do?" asked Tony the Elf. "Bust in there and beat the truth out of him? He's three times as tall as you are, and probably weighs twenty times what you do."

"Surely the four of us together could put up a –"

"Get that thought out of your head right now. That's how you get killed in this place."

"But my –"

"Even if I was willing to risk my life – and let me be absolutely one hundred percent crystal fucking clear on this – I am not, that would make three of us. Not four. The dwarf girl isn't one of us. Remember? I'll go out on a limb and assume she's not suicidally insane. And just in case you didn't notice, that's not some furry orc wearing a Viking helmet in there. It's a fucking minotaur. If you go through that door, you will not return."

"Your point is taken," said Tim. "Got any suggestions?"

"Do they keep their tubes in there?" Tony the Elf glanced down at the two backpacks.

"Their what?"

"Their character sheets."

Tim's eyes went as wide as tennis balls, and he dropped to his knees and started digging through a bag. He frantically unscrewed a scroll case and uncurled the paper. "Fuck, this is Chaz." He quickly

discarded it and tore through the other bag.

Dave picked up Chaz's character sheet. "Well, at least Chaz is doing okay. He's still got a couple of temporary points missing from his constitution, but his HP is full."

"Oh, thank God," said Tim, holding up the other sheet. "Katherine's still at full hit points."

Tony the Elf let out a long, satisfied sigh and smiled. Tim jumped up and hugged him.

"What the hell is going on?" Jorn asked Dave. "What are you guys so happy about? What about his sister?"

"This is another one of those cultural differences."

Tony the Elf allowed Tim to continue hugging him for a short time, and then gently removed his arms from around his leg and his head from his crotch.

"The girl and her friend are okay for now. I suggest we head back to the Whore's Head. We'll set up a rotation to keep a watch on the character sheets. But we are going to need some rest before we organize any sort of search for them."

Tim wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and nodded.

"Can we walk you somewhere?" Dave asked Jorn.

"No, thank you. I don't live far from here."

"I hope you'll come back and visit me at the Whore's Head sometime."

"You can count on it," said Jorn. "Just for the sake of morbid curiosity."

Chapter 6

Cooper lit up a cigarette he had bummed from Frank. Julian sat to his left. Across the table from them, Stuart, Frank, and Rhonda sat like a panel of judges. Rhonda made a show of waving the cigarette smoke out of her face.

"We're gonna be together for a while," said Frank. "We might as well get to know each other. Tell me something about yourselves. What did you do back home?"

"We deliver pizzas for Papa Joe's," said Julian. "It's a local place."

Frank nodded. "So you all work together?"

"No," said Julian. "Just me and Cooper."

"Pizza delivery, huh?" said Frank. "So, what are you, working your way through college?"

"Yes, sir," said Julian.

Frank laughed. "You don't have to call me sir. This isn't an interrogation. We're just talking. So what school do you go to?"

"Virginia College."

"I thought you guys were from Mississippi."

"It's a chain school," said Julian. "They have a campus in Gulfport."

"You a college boy, too, Goliath?"

"I dropped out of college," said Cooper. He looked down at his beer. "Eleven years ago." He wished Julian hadn't brought up the pizza thing. It was all well and good for Julian. That's what you're supposed to do when you're in college. But when you're thirty...

"And you're still delivering pizza," said Rhonda. "Your ambition inspires me."

"And your many chins inspire me."

Rhonda pointed a pudgy finger in Cooper's face. "I'm warning you, you –"

Frank put his hand on Rhonda's and lowered it to the table. "Take it easy, you two." He smiled at Cooper. "So tell me. Is pizza delivery all I've been led to believe it is, or have the pornos all been lying to me this whole time?"

"Huh?" said Cooper.

"You ever make a delivery to a lonely housewife looking for some *extra sausage*?"

"Ha!" said Cooper. "No, nothing like that. Most of our clientele are fat and ugly anyway. Completely unfuckable. No offense, Rhonda."

Rhonda stood up so fast that her stool tipped over. She began muttering to herself and her fist glowed with a bright white light. Julian scooted half a foot to the left.

"Hey hey," said Frank. "None of that. He said 'No offense'."

“Seriously?” said Rhonda.

“Cut him some slack. He’s stupid.”

“That’s true,” said Cooper in his own defense. “I am.”

The light went out from Rhonda’s fist. She wagged a finger back and forth between Frank and Cooper. “There’s only so much of this I’m going to take.” She stomped off toward the corner where Stuart’s wife and two elf women were playing a card game.

Cooper helped himself to the unfinished portion of the beer Rhonda had left behind as he watched her go. “Her ass looks like two hippos on a see-saw.”

Frank smiled and shook his head. “You are a piece of work, my friend. But don’t underestimate Rhonda. She’s a very capable wizardess.”

“Thanks for the warning,” said Cooper. “But I don’t think I could ever be afraid of someone wearing a muumuu.”

“It wasn’t a warning,” said Frank. The smile was gone from his face, as was the mirth from his voice. He leaned in close. “Because she isn’t your enemy. There’s a big dangerous world out there that we don’t belong to. Our only hope of survival is to stand alongside one another. Rhonda is someone you’re going to want on your side.”

“I understand,” said Cooper, meekly.

Frank narrowed his eyes and nodded at Cooper. “Good. Because what I’m about to say is a warning, so listen carefully. I don’t care if you two fight verbally until you’re blue in the face. Hell, that’s entertainment as far as I’m concerned. But I’ll not tolerate violence between two of our own. We’ve had to throw people out of here before. Now I like you. You make me laugh and feel like an intellectual giant. But if you ever lay one of those big meat-fists on one of my people, I will kick your ugly ass to the curb. Are we of an understanding?”

“We are.”

Frank’s face relaxed as he sat back in his chair. “Good. Now tell me more about –”

“They’re back!” shouted a dwarf manning the front entrance. He opened the door just in time for Tony the Elf to hurry through, followed by Tim, Dave, Katherine’s wolf, and Ravenus. Noticeably absent were Dave’s she-dwarf friend, the bard dude, and Katherine.

Cooper stood up. “Where’s Katherine?” he asked Tim.

“We don’t know,” said Tim. “But wherever she is, she’s all right for now.”

“How do you know that?” asked Julian.

“We have her character sheet.” He held up a scroll tube.

Frank stood up on his table and clapped his hands twice. “All right everyone. That’s enough excitement for one night. It’s back to work in

the morning. Assignments will be changed slightly, so check in before you check out. Lights out in five.”

Everyone stood up like a bunch of worker ants, removing glasses and wiping tables, moving tables and stools up against the walls of the room, spreading out bedrolls on the floor. It was choreographed as if they were all part of one organic machine. Within minutes the room was transformed from a pub to something that looked like kindergarten nap time.

“Work?” asked Cooper.

“Sure,” said Frank, hopping down onto his stool, then onto the floor. “We’ve got to make a living just like anyone. And if we ever hope to get magicked out of this place, it’s probably gonna cost some serious coin. Naturally, I’ll allow Frodo to take a partner and go search for his sister, but the rest of you are gonna have to find some way to make yourselves useful. Did any of you spend any skill points on a profession?”

Tim, Dave, Cooper, and Julian looked at one another in uncomfortable silence.

“Of course not,” said Frank. “Nobody ever does. That’s okay. We’ve come up with some alternative ways of making money.” He pointed up at Cooper. “You’ll be perfect for werewolf duty.”

“You know I’m only level two, right?”

“Ha! Trust me, big guy. Now you fellas get some sleep.”

“What’s that for?” asked Julian, pointing to a corner of the room that hadn’t been cleared of tables and stools.

“That’s for you, friend,” said Frank.

“For me?”

“It’s for the elves. You guys don’t sleep. You just zone out for a couple of hours. So that’s a place for you guys to hang out while the rest of us sleep. It works out well for everyone. You guys don’t get bored, and we don’t have to worry about keeping watch. Just don’t all zone out at the same time, and try to keep the chatter to a reasonable volume.”

Julian nodded his head. “Impressive. I could get used to this place.”

“Don’t,” said Tim. “We’re going to find Katherine, and then find a way home.” He held up Katherine’s character sheet. “Would you and the other elves mind keeping an eye on this?”

Julian took the paper. “Sure thing.”

“Wake me up if there’s any change in her condition.”

“You got it.”

Chapter 7

Julian bade good night to his friends. The tavern had an excess of bedrolls and blankets for whoever wanted them, which Dave and Tim were happy to take advantage of. Cooper opted to wrap himself up in the torn, dirty, and blood-stained canvas which had formerly covered a wagon in the not-so-distant past. He lay down on the rough wooden floor. The three of them were fast asleep within less than a minute of hitting the floor.

A slightly familiar clattering sound turned Julian's attention to the elf corner of the room. He glanced at Katherine's character sheet. Still no change. He walked across the room to where the elves were congregated.

"Barry can fireball the zombies," said an elf that Julian hadn't yet been introduced to. He wore his hair in a ponytail, and a red bandana around his forehead. "I want to attack the mohrg."

"If you go after the mohrg," said Tony the Elf, "the three zombies standing next to you get an attack of opportunity."

"Are you guys doing what I think you're doing?" asked Julian. Peeking over the shoulders of the elves huddled at the table, he saw what he was expecting to see. The five elves who weren't Tony had thick, pulpy character sheets scribbled out in front of them with quill pens. A crude graph had been carved into the tabletop. In the middle of the table sat a collection of rough, carved wooden dice. There were also some wooden pegs and copper coins placed neatly within squares of the graph, which Julian took to represent characters and monsters respectively. Tony the Elf sat behind a screen made of two thin boards joined at an angle. Behind the screen was a giant sheet of the same rough paper, this one covered in illegible notes, scribbles, and numbers.

Tony the Elf looked up at Julian. "It kills the time."

"They don't get an attack of opportunity if I only take a five foot step," argued the elf in the red bandana. He moved a peg away from three lined up copper coins and toward a silver coin. "I can go to this square, still reach the mohrg, and be safely out of range of the zombies."

Tony the Elf sighed and rolled his eyes. "We've been through this, Scorn. You can only use the five foot step rule if you don't take any other actions that round. If you try to attack the mohrg, the zombies are going to eat your face off."

"I think he's right," said the elf next to Scorn.

"Shut up, Barry," said Scorn. "Why would a five foot step count as a full move action?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said Julian.

"Interrupt all you like," said Tony the Elf. "Like I said, we're just killing time. And you seem like someone I want to stab a lot less than I do your idiot friends."

"Thanks."

"What's on your mind?"

"I was just wondering why you guys are playing this. I mean, just take a look around. We're here. Look at your ears. You're an elf, for crying out loud. We could be out having real adventures, fighting monsters, collecting treasures."

"We could have been doing that stuff back in the real world, too," said Tony the Elf. "We could have gone around stabbing people and taking their money. Or run off into the woods and look for a bear to kill. But wherever you are, here or there, that's a good way to get yourself imprisoned or killed. You and your friends should know that better than any of us, I would think."

Julian frowned. "I guess you have a point there. But are you saying that this has all become boring and mundane to you?"

"Not at all," said Tony the Elf. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing two drunk wizards duke it out in the streets. But right now, sitting around here while everyone else is sleeping. Yeah, this is boring as shit."

"Have you... never mind."

"Spit it out, man."

"I think I may have a way to solve your current argument about the rules."

Scorn laughed. "Aren't you the one who hadn't ever played the game before?"

"Shut up, Scorn," said Tony the Elf. "I'd like to hear what the kid has to say."

"I've noticed that the environment in this world adheres strictly to game rules, often times in defiance of logic or even physics."

The group of elves all turned to one another, murmuring laughter and memories.

"Yes," said Tony the Elf. "I think we can all agree on that. What's your point?"

"We could just act out the scenario in question," said Julian. "Three of you could stand in a line here." He waved his hand across a section of floor. "Scorn could stand right here, and you could stand right over there. Scorn could try to step toward you and punch you, and the three of you playing the zombies could try to punch him. If the zombies get their punches off before Scorn reaches you, then your ruling for the attacks of opportunity is sound."

Tony the Elf looked at the players. The players looked at each

other.

Scorn harrumphed. "That's the most retar—"

"Brilliant," said Tony the Elf. "Ready to give it a try, Scorn?"

"I'll just attack one of the fucking zombies."

"Roll it."

Scorn rolled the die. "Two. What a big fucking surprise."

"That's a miss," said Tony the Elf.

"No shit," said Scorn. He glared at the elf at the opposite end of the table. "I might roll better if the nineteen side wasn't three times as big as any of the others."

"Blow me, Scorn," said the elf on the receiving end of Scorn's glare. "Do you know how hard it was to carve all of these dice? I've only got two ranks of woodworking. If I ever go up another level, I'll put some more skill points in it. But for now, this is what we've got."

Julian looked over the shoulder of the elf called Barry. According to the character sheet, Barry was playing an eighth level dwarven fighter. "So what level are you guys at in... is 'the real world' the appropriate phrase here?"

"I'm a level four ranger," said Tony the Elf. "Scorn is a third level wizard. Barry is a second level rogue. Dudley is a... what were you again, Dudley?"

"I've got two levels of rogue and one level of fighter."

"That's right. And Fritz," Tony the Elf addressed the elf who had crafted the wooden dice. "What are you?"

Fitz sighed. "I'm a second level bard."

The rest of the table pretended unconvincingly to be trying to hold in their laughter.

"Fuck you guys," said Fritz. "At least I can earn an income."

"Why are you all still at such low levels?" asked Julian.

"There are a couple of reasons for that," said Tony the Elf. "The primary reason is that fighting monsters is dangerous. The other reason... once you start killing things, it gets in your head. I've seen good men turn bad."

"You mean people from Earth?"

"Yeah. The folks you see in here aren't everyone who Mordred sent over. Some folks really like it here. They go native. There's a few people scattered around town doing their own thing. They don't like the idea of hanging out drinking in a tavern all day and night. They get apprentice jobs making horseshoes or blankets or whatever. The blacksmith's assistant right up the road. He's one of us."

"What's so bad about being a blacksmith's assistant?"

"Nothing. I wasn't finished though. There's a group that call themselves The Four Horsemen." The players looked at one another in silent repugnance. "Your friends met a few of them tonight."

“What do they do?”

“Whatever the hell they want,” said Scorn. He lifted the bandana from his forehead to reveal a long scar across his right temple. “I got this for refusing to surrender the last chicken wing on the table.”

“It was a hard decision to make,” said Tony the Elf. “But we kicked him out. His friends followed.”

“Why was that a hard decision?” asked Julian. “It seems perfectly reasonable to me.”

“They’re just kids. Like, middle school age. I mean, think of the shittiest kid you ever met. Would you feel comfortable just abandoning him in the middle of a foreign city?”

“No, but –”

“Well as it turned out,” Tony the Elf continued. “We should have been more afraid for the city than for those little bastards. This is all just one big party for them. They think they’re invincible, and so far no one has been able to prove otherwise.”

“Have you tried talking to them?”

“Ha!” said Scorn. “Have you ever tried to reason with a middle-schooler? Do I have to remind you that I was stabbed in the face over a piece of chicken?”

“They’re only getting worse,” said Tony the Elf. “They all but worship Mordred, and he treats them like fucking pets. They’ve been shooting through levels, getting more powerful every day. God help us when they figure out he’s gone.”

“What are they doing?” asked Julian. “I mean, are they killing people?”

“Who knows?” said Tony the Elf. “They started out just taking what they wanted wherever they went. Snatching a purse here and there. Starting bar brawls just so they could slip out during the chaos without paying the tab. That sort of thing. But it looks like they’re escalating. The two we met tonight were more than ready to just up and rape your friend’s dwarf girl. My guess is that they’re getting bored without Mordred around.”

“So what do we do?” asked Julian.

Tony the Elf shrugged. “Roll up a character.”

Chapter 8

Chaz woke up to the sensation of being inside a rock tumbler. A dull pain in his head. The sounds of wheels turning and gravel crunching. Hooves? He opened his eyes. Wherever he was, he was moving very quickly. A sheer rocky wall was zipping past a dark window frame. He was in some sort of wagon.

"Rise and shine, Chaz," said Katherine. She smiled down at him from where she sat. He must be on the floor.

He turned around to look at the window on the other side of the wagon. The view was as wide and open as the opposite side's view was solid and unyielding. It was as if they were flying. A fat yellow moon sat bloated in the night sky, shining down on the city below. They must be several hundred feet up, traveling at crazy speeds up a path on a cliff face. He wrapped his arms around Katherine's legs. She ran her fingers calmly through his hair.

"It's perfectly safe," said an unfamiliar voice. Chaz didn't know how he could have missed the guy with his purple suit and dazzling eyes. "You have nothing to fear. Enjoy the view."

"Who are you?" said Chaz. "Katherine, who is this guy? Where are we going? Where are the guys?"

"Don't worry," said Katherine. "He's nice."

"But who the fuck is he?"

"Language," said the purple-suited man. "I'll have none of that in my coach or in my house, thank you."

"Katherine?"

"He's... um..."

"My name," said the man, "is Millard von Pleck, the fourteenth of my name, and lord of Castle Pleck."

"Jesus, Katherine!" said Chaz. "You got in this guy's wagon without even learning his name? Didn't you see any PSAs when you were a kid?"

"He's nice," said Katherine. "Look at his eyes." She tilted her head and stared at the man like a grade-schooler with a teacher crush.

"Are you fucking high?" said Chaz, and almost immediately felt a smack on the top of his head. He looked up at the man called Millard von Pleck. "Ow, man! What the fuck?"

Millard smacked him on the head again with a jockey whip. "Language."

"Knock it off, man!"

Millard rested the whip on his lap. "You mind your tongue in my presence. And you should always mind your tongue in the presence of a lady."

“Katherine,” Chaz pleaded. “Why are we with this guy? He could be a murderer or a rapist.”

Millard crossed one knee over the other and looked bitterly out of the window. “You can set aside your fear of being raped.”

“I distinctly remember mentioning two fears.”

Millard turned his gaze from the window and smiled down at Chaz. “You just mind your manners, son, and you’ll be quite safe. I assure you.”

Chaz hugged Katherine’s legs more tightly. “It’s cold.”

Millard poked his head out of the window and quickly back in again. “We’re nearly there.”

A few minutes later, the swift pounding of hooves slowed to a canter, then a trot, then finally a walk before stopping altogether. Millard opened the coach door and stepped out. He assisted Katherine out next. Chaz was left to get out unassisted.

Charcoal grey stone walls towered above him, maybe thirty or forty feet high. They were rough and crumbly, as if they hadn’t been maintained in a few centuries.

“I hope you’ll pardon the rough exterior,” said Millard. “I find it helps keep away solicitors.”

Looking at the walls brought on a dizzy spell. Chaz looked away, only for his gaze to meet that of the horse who had pulled him up all this way. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! What the fuck is that?”

Smack.

“Ow!” Chaz turned around, rubbing the top of his head. He could have sworn Millard had been more than twenty feet away from him just a second ago. But there he was, standing right in front of him with the jockey whip in his hand. “I wish you’d quit doing that.”

“You’ll learn sooner or later.”

“What did you do to that horse, man?” said Chaz. “Is it even alive?”

“Does it look alive?”

It was a difficult question. It displayed a lot of the qualities one associates with life. It stood upright and moved around and made horse noises. But it also had some characteristics that Chaz had always earmarked for signs of being dead. Its skin was rotting off, sticking so tightly to the bones that you could count them. A cockroach crawled out of its right nostril, up its face, and into its ear, and the horse seemed completely unfazed by it. Chaz staggered, but Millard caught him by the arm and held him up.

“Stable,” said Millard.

Chaz found his footing and stood up straight. “It’s okay. I’m cool, man.”

The horse trotted away.

“Where’s it going?”

Millard gave him a contemptuous laugh. "The stable." He let go of Chaz's arm and offered his own arm to Katherine. "Let's get you inside. You must be freezing to death out here."

She wrapped his arm around her waist and moved in close to him. She looked up into his eyes. "I don't mind the cold."

Millard stared down at her. "Of course you don't, dear."

"I can't believe the sh—" Millard's glare hit Chaz as sharply as the jockey whip had. "stuff I'm hearing."

Millard gave Chaz a satisfied nod and walked up to a set of huge, wooden double doors that appeared to be more sturdy than the stone walls they allowed entrance to. A pair of guards stepped out from the shadows of pillars to open the doors. They looked to be at least as big around as Cooper, but with a human build rather than that of a half-orc. It was impossible to tell for sure, as they were covered from head to toe in armor. Their helmets had no visors, but their faces were covered in what Chaz might have called a ski mask if he thought that folks around here were familiar with the concepts of skiing or bank robbing.

The guards didn't speak. There was only the slightest clink of metal on metal as each guard placed a mailed hand on an iron ring bolted to either door.

"Open," said Millard. A soft humming sound came from within the castle as a red light shone through the crack between the doors like the scanner in a supermarket checkout. It ran from the top of the doorway down to the floor, after which the guards pulled the heavy doors open. They didn't squeak or whine on the hinges. It was total silence.

"Come along, bard," said Millard. "I'd like you to amuse us." He led Katherine through the open double doors.

Chaz took one last look down at the city below. Who knew what terrors he would run into on this mountain alone, on foot, in the dark? He would probably die of exposure before he had the chance to be eaten by leprechauns, or whatever the hell was waiting for him out there. He gauged his chances of survival after entering the castle as only marginally more likely, but at least he might be fed before he was killed. He hurried after Millard and Katherine.

Chapter 9

Cooper opened his eyes and sat upright as fast as a catapult being released. He sniffed the air. The scent was familiar, but seemed to be part of a long forgotten past.

“Bacon?”

“Rise and shine, fuckers!” shouted Frank. The young elf who had been tending the bar the previous night followed closely behind him, carrying two giant trays which were covered in piles of bacon. “The sun is up. It’s a brand new day.”

The floor came alive with bodies moving like recently animated zombies trying to orient themselves. Only Tim was as quick to his feet as Cooper had been. Cooper frowned as Tim rushed over to the elf corner and snatched his sister’s character sheet out of Julian’s hand. Seeing the look of relief on Tim’s face, Cooper’s mind went back to the smell of bacon.

“Where did you get all of this bacon?” asked Cooper.

Frank kicked a dwarf who didn’t seem quite motivated enough to wake up just yet. “Our rangers and druids took down a few boars a couple of days ago. We’ve got pork chops for lunch.”

Cooper’s eyes began to water. “I don’t think I want to leave this place.”

“Well hopefully that’s a choice we’ll all have to make in the not-too-distant future,” said Frank. “Just mind you don’t fuck it up for those of us who do want to return to our homes.” He stood on a chair and raised his voice. “Now eat up everyone. Let’s make this a good day. Those of you with jobs, go to work. Bards, get on those street corners and sing your asses off. Wizards and sorcerers, start writing and brewing your most profitable scrolls and potions. Everyone else, see me for assignments. And anyone with ranks in either the local knowledge or Gather Information skills, please stay behind. Remember, everyone. We may have an opportunity to go home. It’s a long shot, but if it works, it’s going to cost money. So fucking whistle while you work.”

The yawning mass of bodies unceremoniously scarfed back strips of bacon and drank cups of watered down beer until their bellies were full and their eyes were open. About a dozen people stayed behind while everyone who knew their jobs shambled toward the exit.

Before anyone could leave, the door swung open, sending an elf flying backward to fall on the floor. In the doorway stood the baddest-looking motherfucker Cooper had ever seen. The figure all but filled the doorway, and actually had to duck its head under the frame to step inside.

The sleepiness had gone from everyone's eyes. No one dared move nor make a sound.

Now that the figure had moved in from the light of the doorway, Cooper was able to get a better look. It was another half-orc, only this one was far bigger than Cooper. Charcoal grey armor covered him from head to toe. It was dented in places. Metal patches had been welded on in others. It had seen its share of action. The helmet was the same color, save for the two horns protruding from each side. The only pieces of the armor which didn't match were the gauntlets. They were silvery blue, and polished to a reflective shine.

"Good morning, Frank," said the half-orc.

Frank stood up straight atop the table. "What are you doing here, Eric?"

"My name," said the giant, removing his helmet to reveal a surprisingly handsome face for a half-orc, "is Pestilence!

His presence was enough for Cooper to take a step back, but Frank stood his ground.

"Your name is Eric Weinberg. You're a pimply-faced little brat who takes his books and dice home every time somebody orders something other than pepperoni on the pizza."

"You forget yourself, Frank," said Eric, or Pestilence, or whoever the fuck he was. He stepped forward, and the crowd gave him a wide berth. It only took two strides for him to be right in Frank's face. Even with Frank standing on a table, this half-orc still stood over a head taller than him. "I could tear you apart right here and now."

"You can't take us all," said Frank. Cooper wondered whether the little guy was putting up a front, genuinely this badass, or just plain suicidal. "You forget our arrangement. We don't bother you, and you stay away from the Whore's Head. I repeat. What are you doing here, *Eric*?" Frank spoke his name as if he was daring him to make a move.

Eric grinned. "Fine," he said. "I'll just get right to it. We haven't heard from the Cavern Master in a while, and we were beginning to get concerned for our good friend, Mordred. I just wanted to know if you've heard anything. That's all."

"I... um..." Frank broke eye contact with Eric. He was floundering.

"Mordred went on vacation," said Cooper. Somebody had to say something. "Just packed up and went to Pensacola. Said he'd be back in a week or so."

Eric walked up to stand face-to-face with Cooper. The big guy had a good thirty pounds on him, and Cooper didn't think he'd be able to land more than a couple of punches before he was out of the fight... if it came to that.

"And just what the hell is this supposed to be?" said Eric. "I feel ashamed to call myself a half-orc standing next to you. You are an

embarrassment to your race.”

Cooper farted. It was quite loud.

“Ugh,” said Eric. “You are completely and utterly disgusting. Where is your dignity, man?”

“Sorry,” said Cooper. “I must have left it in your mom.”

Two or three giggles broke the thick silence, but they stopped abruptly when Eric glared at the crowd, looking for the source.

Eric grabbed the hilt of his sword and began to unsheathe it. He’d only drawn it a quarter of the way out when he stopped and broke eye contact with Cooper. Cooper looked around to see what had made him stop. There were at least a dozen sets of hands glowing blue, pink, and green, shining in the dreary dimness of the Whore’s Head common room. Julian held his fist cocked back, its familiar golden glow betraying a Magic Missile ready to be let loose. The thought of using a pussy spell like that against someone like this was almost enough to make Cooper laugh. Then again, a dozen Magic Missiles might just lay this fucker down. He’d at least be walking funny on his way out.

A snarl from behind Eric caught the big bastard’s attention. A wolf loomed behind him, pacing back and forth between him and the door. Two more wolves lurked in the shadows, their eyes reflecting what little light there was in the room. Two cats scurried across a beam above Eric’s head. A hawk flew past, presumably just to make itself known. A few rats scurried purposefully out of the crowd to glare at the intruder. Even a fat little toad hopped forward. Ravenus flapped down to land on Cooper’s shoulder. Cooper, for once, was glad to have him there.

Eric shoved his sword hard back into its scabbard and glared hard at Cooper. “This isn’t over...” He looked as though he wanted to continue, but dared not call Cooper another name, lest it come back to bite him in the ass again.

He turned and stomped toward the exit. He opened the door and turned around. “This treachery shall not go unpunished!” The big bastard looked like he was going to start crying. Cooper almost felt sorry for him. Eric ducked under the frame and slammed the door behind him.

The crowd remained silent. Cooper turned to Frank, expecting a scolding. It was laughable, really, he tried to convince himself. Him, being scolded by a gnome. But that gnome had just faced off against a bigger badass than himself. He actually felt a little nervous.

“You have a gift, my friend,” said Frank.

“Huh?”

“A certain knack for saying just the right thing to push a man beyond the threshold of good judgment.”

“You’re not mad?”

"I damn well should be," said Frank. "That big mouth of yours could have gotten one or more of us killed."

Cooper hung his head. "Sorry."

"It could have," Frank continued. "But it didn't. Instead, you inspired courage. You made us realize that together we are stronger than they are."

"But you said you already knew that."

"We knew it on a superficial level, but that's not the same as *knowing it* knowing it. You catch my meaning?"

"No."

"You made that little prick back down," said Frank. "He's not going to bother us again for quite some time."

Cooper wasn't accustomed to praise, and it felt a little uncomfortable. He could feel the blood rushing to his big leathery cheeks. "It was nothing."

Frank gave Cooper a friendly slap on the cheek. "You're all right." The little gnome stepped back to the center of his table and clapped his hands above his head. "Nothing's changed here," he said. "All of you go about your business. Go make some coin."

"What about the Horsemen?" asked a nearby dwarf.

"*Horsemen*," Frank spat out the word as if it was a lump of shit in his mouth. "Eric's just run off to find some hole to cry in. You've got nothing to fear from *the Horsemen*. Just keep your guard up, try to blend in, and watch one another's backs. You'll be okay."

And that was that. Everyone grabbed what supplies they required for the day's work ahead, and exited the Inn.

"Hey listen, Frank," said Tim when most of the crowd had gone. "About the —"

"Don't even say it," said Frank. "I know you've got to go look for your sister. Take your elf friend with you, and I'll throw in a couple of guys to snoop around for information."

"Thanks."

"But I'm going to need the healer and the big bastard for another assignment."

"Fuck that," said Cooper. "I'm going to help Tim."

"We'll be okay," said Tim. "You go do whatever it is Frank needs you to do. We need brains right now more than brawn."

Cooper pursed his lips.

Julian slapped Tim lightly on the arm. "Hey."

"What?" said Tim. "Oh shit. I'm sorry Cooper. I didn't mean it like that. I'm not thinking straight. I'm worried about Katherine."

"I know," said Cooper. "We're all worried. Go find her. I'll go with Frank."

"All right, Tim," said Frank. "You've got yourself, the elf, a talking

bird, and your sister's wolf. I'm sending Gorgonzola and Tony the Elf with you as well. They'll be able to help you out with finding information. Bring some of your sister's shit with you, too. See if you can get that big wolf of hers to pick up her scent."

"That's a good idea," said Tim. "Thanks for your help."

"Don't sweat it. Go on. Get moving."

"Good luck!" Dave called out as Tim's search party left the tavern.

"Stuart," said Frank. The bald guy with the hot wife stood at attention. "I need you to take the dwarf and the big guy out on werewolf duty."

"What?" said Stuart and Cooper simultaneously.

"Look," said Frank. "I know you two aren't the best of friends right now, but we need to do this. Think of it as a team building exercise. You and he have the fastest feet of anyone here."

"I'm not fast at all," said Dave.

"I'd guessed as much," said Frank. "But there's a good chance they'll need some healing. That's where you come in."

"Listen, Frank," said Cooper. "I know I look like a big bad motherfucker. But I'm still only a second level barbarian. Dave's only a second level cleric. And Stuart's..." Cooper noticed that Stuart was still unarmed and wearing his pajamas. "What the fuck are you, Stuart?"

"I'm a fourth level monk."

Cooper laughed out loud. "A monk? Who plays a monk?"

"It's not as bad a class as people make it out to be if you know how to play it right."

"You guys play nice together," said Frank. "Keep in mind what we're working for. A chance, however small, to go home. Now get going."

"Come on," Stuart said bitterly. "Let's get suited up."

Chapter 10

Tim stood in the alley next to the Piss Bucket Tavern. He had Butterbean's head nearly all the way inside Katherine's backpack.

"Are you sure you're doing that right?" asked Julian.

"I don't know. I've never done this before."

"This is a waste of time," said Tony the Elf. "That's her animal companion, right? If he had any idea where she was, we wouldn't be able to hold him back from going after her."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

Tony the Elf shook his head.

Tim turned to the gnome. "What about you, Gorgonzola? Didn't Frank send you with us because you have the Gather Information skill? Why don't you go gather some information?"

"What am I supposed to do?" asked Gorgonzola. "Ask random people on the street if they've seen that guy's sister? I need something to work with. How's she holding up?"

Tim unrolled Katherine's character sheet. "She's still at full hit points. Wherever she is, she must be okay."

"Has anything on the sheet changed?"

"No," said Tim impatiently. "Her hit points are the same. Her experience points are the same. We've got all her shit with us, so her inventory is... hang on a second. What's this?"

Julian, Tony the Elf, and Gorgonzola crowded around Tim. The space on the back of the character sheet reserved for inventory was blank except for one entry that said "giant pumpkin."

"That's strange," said Julian.

"I was pretty drunk last night, but I think I'd remember if Katherine was walking around with a giant pumpkin. This must be something she's acquired since she went missing."

Gorgonzola smiled. "That's something I can work with. Give me a few minutes." He scurried out of the alley and into the crowded market.

"How's this going to help?" asked Julian.

"You'd be surprised what Gorgonzola can do with a tiny scrap of information," said Tony the Elf. "Anyone can ask questions. You don't take six ranks in the Gather Information skill just to be able to ask questions. He can take seemingly innocuous bits of random data and make connections and assessments that you or I wouldn't even think of."

"Like a detective?" said Julian.

"Yeah," said Tony the Elf. "but more than that. He's like Sherlock Holmes, Dr. House, and Rainman combined."

“That’s pretty cool.”

Tim put his hand on his thigh and felt nothing. The instinct to grab his cell phone to check the time was still strong with him. Frustrated, he crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. “We’ll see how cool it is when he –”

“Hey guys!” shouted Gorgonzola, scampering out of the crowded street.

“What did you find out?” asked Tony the Elf.

Gorgonzola took a minute to catch his breath before speaking. “Elmore the Butcher’s wife caught a case of the clap from Harry the Tanner’s eldest son. Three of Rostand the Baker’s seven children have conspicuously blue eyes and blond hair, much like Stanford P. Ames, the smithy who was found dead in his kitchen with forty-seven stab wounds in his back. Police called it a suicide, but there are rumors. Stanley the Mason has five testicles, and three of them are –”

“Did you find out anything about my sister?” Tim asked.

“Oh yeah,” said Gorgonzola. “Sorry.” He pulled a scrap of paper out from under his vest. “I’ve got an address.”

Tim wrapped an arm around Butterbean’s neck and gave him a squeeze. “Unfucking-believable.”

“It’s a bit of a hike,” said Gorgonzola. “On the other side of town, in the Garden District.”

Tony the Elf raised his eyebrows and nodded. “Posh.”

“What’s that?” asked Tim.

“We’re headed to a very rich neighborhood. Looks like your sister might have snagged herself a sugar daddy.”

Flashes of purple ran through Tim’s hazy memory of the previous night. “I think I remember something like that,” said Tim. “I think she was getting chatted up at the bar by some fancy-pants-looking guy. Do you remember, Julian?”

“I was asleep.”

“What an inconsiderate bitch,” said Tim. “It’s just like her to go running off with some guy and not giving a shit that people might worry about her.”

“Hold off before making any judgments,” said Gorgonzola. “All I’ve got here is the address of a gardening enthusiast who grows giant pumpkins as a hobby. It’s a lead we can work with, but it’s no guarantee she’s there.”

Tony the Elf took the lead, weaving through the crowded city streets at a demanding pace. Tim was self-conscious at first, wanting to keep as low a profile as possible for a group consisting of two elves, a gnome, a halfling, a raven, a sheepdog, and a wolf. The more he took in his surroundings, the less self-conscious he became. No one could complain of Cardinia’s lack of cultural diversity. A creature with

tentacles growing out of its face bumped shoulders with a satyr, drawing not so much as a curious glance from either of them. A lizard man argued with a bugbear over the price of flour, and no one looked twice at them. The only reaction the crowd gave to anything was to part for a procession of four human soldiers dragging a manacled two-headed giant behind them. The prisoner had to be at least thirteen feet tall. Its two heads growled and snarled at the crowd, who seemed less frightened of the beast, and more put off by its smell. Its whole body was covered in a thick, crusty layer of mud and shit. It made Cooper seem fit to perform surgery by comparison.

As the soldiers dragged the prisoner by Tim's group, the smell wafted over Tim like a sewage truck had just spilled its load. One head met Tim's gaze. It turned to the other head, and they both looked at him together.

"Hragh!" they said in unison. Tim yelped and jumped back. The giant's two heads had a good laugh about that. So did two of the soldiers.

"That there's what you call an Ettin," said a tiny, green humanoid hovering above Tim's head. It flapped its leathery wings and offered Tim an uncomfortably friendly grin before continuing. "If you'd like to get a new jacket made, I happen to know the best tailor in all of Cardinia. His prices are most reasona—" A crust of bread bounced off of the creature's face.

"Fuck off, demon!" said Tony the Elf. "He's not interested."

The demon hissed at Tony the Elf and flew off with the bread.

"Will you stop gawking like such a goddamned tourist?" Tony the Elf said to Tim.

"But I –"

"Low profile, remember?"

The crowds thinned out as they moved away from the city proper. The only other time there was a notable increase in the density of people was when Tony led them through the gate of a ten-foot high stone wall. Bored guards leaned on their spears, not even bothering to look at who entered or left the city.

"Shouldn't they be scrutinizing people a bit more?" Julian asked Tony the Elf once they had shouldered their way past a group of hobgoblins. "I mean, check people's papers or something?"

"The kingdom has been at peace for over a hundred and fifty years," said Tony the Elf. Cardinia is not only the capital, but it's a major trading hub. People are free to come and go as they please, so long as they don't cause trouble."

"Why are we leaving?" asked Tim. "Didn't you say this pumpkin guy was in a posh part of the city?"

"The borders of Cardinia extend beyond the city walls," said

Gorgonzola. "All the way to the Bluerun River. For enough money, you can have the prestige of being able to call yourself Cardinian, but not have to deal with the smells and noise and whatnot."

They crossed over a meadow until they came to a little country path. Judging by the number of dandelions growing out of it, Tim guessed that this was not a well-traveled road. On the side they had come from, there was nothing but meadow all the way to the city wall. On the other side, however, was a virtual wall of vegetation. Trees, hedgerows, vine-covered brick walls. It occurred to Tim that they were walking past pieces of private property.

"This is it," said Gorgonzola, stopping in front of a four-foot tall hedgerow and tucking the scrap of paper into his vest. The hedgerow was interrupted in the middle by a white lattice archway, grown over tastefully with flowering vines. The scents of roses and honeysuckle were intoxicating. Beyond the archway was a meticulously kept lawn and a charming little country cottage.

This place is lovely," said Tim. "I almost can't blame her for wanting to stay here."

Butterbean must have thought differently. He sniffed the air and started to growl. It was low and menacing.

"Take it easy boy," said Tim, rubbing down the fur that had begun to stand up on the back of Butterbean's neck. "Everything is okay." Butterbean barked.

"Can you calm that wolf down?" said Gorgonzola. "We're not going to be very welcome here with an angry wolf."

"Butterbean!" Tim snapped. "Shut up!" He got on one knee to be face-to-face with the wolf and stroked its fur. "We're here to find Katherine." Butterbean whimpered and lowered his head.

Tim walked through the archway, taking in a greedy breath of the fresh air. It was like walking into a fabric softener commercial. The others followed.

The lawn was dotted here and there with large elm trees and abstract toparies. A gardener was clipping away at the hedge closest to Tim.

"Excuse me," said Tim. The gardener turned around. His face was rotten. The skin above his upper lip was torn and hanging off of his face. His hands were little more than bones with dry-rotted gloves of former skin. The one remaining eye in its head was huge and round, due to the lid having rotted away. It stared down at Tim, hedge clippers in hand.

"Jesus!" shouted Tim, backing up into Tony the Elf. Butterbean jumped forward and ripped one of the thing's arms right off.

"Magic Missile," said Julian, thrusting his hands forward. A sparkling bolt of light shot out of his hands and hit the creature square

in the chest. It reeled backwards. Before anyone else could make a move, a shaft of wood sprouted out of the tree Julian was standing next to, right above his head. Everyone froze except for Butterbean, who continued to tear at the arm he had taken.

“The hell you think yer doin’ to my gardener?” Everyone turned their heads to the porch. Tim kept one wary eye on ‘the gardener’. An aged man stood with the assistance of a cane. In his other hand he held a large crossbow.

“Butterbean,” Tim said sharply. “Put that down. Get over here.” Butterbean let go of the arm and lay on the grass next to Tim, but continued growling at the zombie.

“The gods damn you all!” shouted the man as he hobbled down the steps towards them. “Do you know how hard it is to find a zombie that can trim hedges? I only just got that one last night.”

The zombie attempted to continue working, but with only one arm it was effectively just beating the hedge with the clippers.

The old man sighed. “Pah! He’s useless now. Go on, you. Get out back and start diggin’ a hole.” The zombie started walking toward the back yard. “Put down the clippers and pick up your arm, you stupid son of a bitch.” Butterbean stood up and barked as it walked off.

“Butterbean, hush,” said Tim.

“The hell’s wrong with yer dog?”

“I don’t know. I guess maybe he doesn’t like zombies.”

“Well you mind he don’t go botherin’ no more of the help. They don’t come cheap.”

“You have more?” Tim looked around and spotted two more zombies on the vast green lawn. One was raking leaves and the other was pouring water from a can along the base of the hedgerow.

“Just what sort of business compelled you fellers to interrupt the tranquility of my afternoon?”

“Julian, could you talk to him? You’ve got better Charisma than me.”

The old man furrowed his brow. “It’s big of you to recognize your shortcomings, son, but what a queer thing to say.”

“We’re, um...” said Tim. “We’re just friends.”

“We heard you grow pumpkins,” said Julian.

The old man’s face lit up. “You heard right, boy. Come on round back and have a look.” He started off in the direction the zombie had gone.

Tim, Tony the Elf, and Gorgonzola looked at Julian.

“Diplomacy,” said Julian. The others nodded and followed the old man.

“The name’s Simon Peppercorn,” said the old man as he hobbled along.

"You have a lovely home, Mr. Peppercorn," said Julian.

"Please, folks round here call me Pep."

"I'm Julian. These are my friends. Tim, Tony the Elf, and Gorgonzola."

"That's nice," said Pep without turning around to see any of them.

Around the side of the house, they passed another zombie. This one was picking red berries from the hedge and putting them into a wicker basket. Tim held his arm firmly around Butterbean's neck as they walked, but the wolf didn't even seem to notice the zombie.

Nearing the back of the house, Tim could make out giant orange spheres in a sea of tangled vines. Beyond the vast pumpkin patch, the land was forested with pines. Birds chirped noisily in the trees, and Tim heard the trickle of a stream somewhere off in the distance. He could see himself retiring in a place like this, settling down with a couple of acres on Bay St. Louis. He'd have to sell a lot of chicken, but it didn't hurt to dream.

Tim's daydream was broken by a howl in the woods, followed by an explosion of black birds fleeing the trees.

"Aw hell," said Pep. He hobbled hurriedly up the steps of a large wooden deck attached to the back of the house. It had a set of patio furniture made of unfinished wood. He set his crossbow on the table and produced a larger one from a massive wooden chest. This one could almost be considered a siege weapon, and it even had a scope.

"What is it?" asked Gorgonzola as he scrambled up the steps.

"What's going on?"

Pep cranked the winch on his giant crossbow and inserted a silver-tipped bolt as long as Tim's arm. "Werewolves," he said with a wicked grin on his face.

"Oh crap," said Tony the Elf. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah," said Pep. "The stupid sons of bitches keep tryin' to make off with my pumpkins." He pushed the smaller crossbow out of the way and stabilized the big one on the table. He licked his lips and closed one eye as he peered through the scope with the other.

"What do werewolves want with pumpkins?" asked Julian.

"Maybe they like pumpkins," Tony the Elf said a little too curtly. Everyone looked at him. Even Pep spared him a glance before returning his gaze to his scope.

"Who knows why folks do what they do?" Pep scanned the pumpkin patch from one forested side to the other. "There's one!"

Tim looked up. Sure enough, a hairy lupine figure was running across the clearing at breakneck speed. It didn't lope and bound like he'd imagined a werewolf would. It looked more like it was just some scared hairy dude.

The trigger clicked and the bow made a mechanical '*thwack*'. The

bolt just missed its target and pierced through a pumpkin instead. The werewolf made no move to steal a pumpkin. It just kept running until it reached the safety of the forest on the other side of the patch.

"Damn!" said Pep, already cranking the winch again. Then his eyes brightened as he looked into his backyard. He cranked faster. "There's another one. Big feller this time."

The second werewolf was indeed bigger than the first one, and he ran more like an animal than a man. Still, its gait was oddly familiar. It stopped and ripped open the pumpkin that had been shot with the crossbow. Pep lined up his shot. *Thwack*.

"Fuck!" shouted the werewolf, plucking the bolt out of its ass.

"Hey," said Tim. "Was that Coo—"

Tony the Elf slapped him in the back of the head.

"Ow," said Tim. "I wish people would stop doing that." He glared up at Tony the Elf, who was glaring right back with a shut-the-fuck-up look on his face. Tim picked up the hint and looked over at Pep.

Pep wasn't paying any attention to either of them. He already had a third bolt loaded. "This one's nice n' stupid," he said.

The big werewolf was still standing there with a bolt in his hand and a hole in his ass when another bolt hit him in the small of the back.

"Goddammit!" it shouted, bending over backwards and plucking out the bolt.

"Coop!" shouted another familiar voice from the wooded area where the big werewolf had come from. "Get your stupid ass over here now!"

Pep started turning the crank on his winch again. "If I can take this big feller down, he'll make a great wood chopper."

"Do you really think it's right, what you're doing?" asked Tim. His voice was shaky.

Pep laughed as he loaded the next silver tipped bolt. "Why you're a soft little guy, aren't you. Lycanthropy is a disease. Believe me, the man inside that body would rather be dead than be the beast it's become."

Tim's mind raced as he tried to think of a way to stop this guy from shooting Cooper again without actually giving Cooper's identity away.

"Do you mind if I give it a try?" asked Julian.

"Why sure, young feller!" said Pep. He handed the crossbow to Julian. "Have you used one of these before?"

"Oh yeah," said Julian. "I um... I use them all the time." It was brilliant. Julian had already demonstrated his lack of proficiency with a crossbow. He'd at least buy Cooper a few seconds to gather his wits and move. He leveled the crossbow and peered into the scope.

"Don't rush yourself," said Pep. "You've got all the time in the —"

Thwack!

“Yeeeeeoow!” howled Cooper, a fresh bolt poking out of his back.

“Shit!” said Julian.

“Dude!” said Tim. “What the fuck, man?”

“Well done, my boy!” said Pep, retrieving the weapon from a stunned and silent Julian. “Now shut up a spell while I put this big bastard out of his misery.” He flicked his hand at Tim.

“I don’t think –” Tim started to say, but the words weren’t coming out of his mouth. Also, he was deaf. He looked around. Tony the Elf was digging in his ear with his finger. Gorgonzola was slapping the side of his head. Julian was opening his mouth widely over and over again, presumably trying to make a noise. He turned back just in time to see Pep pull the trigger on the crossbow.

Tim looked towards Cooper and caught sight of the smaller werewolf. It moved so fast, it barely registered as more than a brown flash as it zipped out of the woods, snatched the flying bolt out of the air, and disappeared into the woods that it had originally come from. Cooper stumbled back toward the safety of the forest behind the other one.

The sound of Pep’s snapping fingers brought sound rushing back into Tim’s ears.

“Blah! Blah! Blah! Blah! Blah!” Julian shouted, until everyone turned around to look at him. He shut up.

“Did you boys see that?” asked Pep, still peering out at the werewolf-free pumpkin patch. “Ain’t never seen one run that fast before.”

“Yeah,” Tim said with a relieved sigh. “That was remarkable.”

“Well,” said Pep. “I suppose that wraps up today’s excitement.” He placed his giant crossbow carefully in its case, lowered the lid, and buckled it shut. He turned to face his guests with a broad smile. “Now how would you boys like – well I’ll be gods damned.” He was looking past them, out into the pumpkin patch.

The smaller werewolf popped out from behind the cover of the trees, jumped onto an impressively large pumpkin, and used it to spring himself into a somersault.

“The little one’s got some spunk in him,” said Pep. “I’ll give him that.” He frantically went to work re-opening his crossbow case as the werewolf landed flawlessly on his feet and did a series of cartwheels toward the other side of the pumpkin patch.

“The trick,” said Pep, squinting into the scope, “is to give him the proper amount of lead...” he moved the crossbow slowly ahead of the werewolf’s position. “... and wait for the perfect shot... and then...” *Thwack!* The bolt caught the werewolf right in the neck. He went down mid-cartwheel, disappearing into the sea of pumpkin vines.

Tony the Elf gasped. Whoever the guy in the other wolf suit was did not stand up.

“Ha!” said Pep. “That one could be a kill! Let’s see what his friend has to say about it.” He hurriedly loaded another bolt and aimed the bow right where he expected Cooper to exit the woods.

A moment of tense silence passed, but Cooper did not disappoint. He poked his wolf-masked head out from behind a tree, and Pep immediately fired. It hit the tree.

“Damn!” said Pep. “Too rushed.”

Cooper bolted out into the open, waving his arms like he was trying to ward off a swarm of mosquitoes as he ran. That only slowed him down and made him a bigger target. Pep hit him twice, once in the chest and once in a flailing arm, before he reached his partner in crime.

“Knock it off, fuckwad!” shouted Cooper, bending over to pick up whoever that other guy was. On his way back to cover, Cooper held the limp body he carried in front of him, but the one last shot Pep was able to get off found its way to Cooper.

“Ow!” said Cooper. “That’s my fucking ear, you sick bastard!” He yanked the one bolt out of the tree before taking cover again.

Pep kept his bow ready, aimed just to the left of their cover, but nothing emerged. He frowned and lowered his weapon. “I guess they done learned their lesson for today. I’ll bet you anything, though. Those stupid sons of bitches will be out there again tomorrow.”

He placed the giant crossbow back in its box. “Can I offer you fellers a drink? Lemonade? Something stronger?”

“I don’t know,” said Tim. He stared out beyond the pumpkin patch, desperately looking for some sign that the guy who had been shot in the neck was okay. “Maybe we should –”

“Lemonade would be lovely,” said Tony the Elf.

“You fellers just sit back and take in the fresh air,” said Pep. “I’ll be right back.” He hobbled through his back door.

Tony the Elf waited until the sounds of clinking glasses could be heard in the kitchen. He cupped his hands over the sides of his mouth and made a bird call. Two chirps and a high-pitched whistle. There was no response. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Julian.

“What’s wrong with you?” Tony the Elf snapped back at him. “What the hell was that business with the crossbow?”

“I was just trying to buy him some time.”

“Then why did you shoot him?”

Julian looked down. “I didn’t mean to.”

“You took aim at him and pulled the trigger!” Tony the Elf was doing his best to keep his voice below a scream.

"I must have rolled a 20," said Julian. "I'm not even proficient with a crossbow."

"What are you talking about? *Everyone* is proficient with a crossbow. It's a Simple Weapon, for crying out loud!"

"The only time I ever tried to use one, it butted me in the face."

Tony the Elf rolled his eyes, and Tim suddenly realized what he was about to say just before he said it. "You're thinking about this all backwards. You didn't roll a 20 this time, thank Christ. You rolled a 1 last time."

"So you're saying I'm proficient with a crossbow?" asked Julian.

"Of course you are, dumbass!"

"That would have been nice to know earlier," said Julian. "I don't have as many Hit Points as the rest of you guys."

Tony the Elf shook his head as he cupped his hands over his mouth to try his bird call again. Two chirps and a whistle. This time the call was answered by a long "Coo" and a "Yup yup!"

Tony the Elf breathed a sigh of relief. Tim and Julian followed suit.

"What the hell kind of bird makes that kind of call?" Tim joked.

Tony the Elf smiled at him.

"I dunno," said Pep. "I hear it every now and again. I wish I could find it so as I could shoot it."

He set a tray down on the table. It had a clay jug and five small glasses. "Now let's get down to business. I presume your visit here today had purpose beyond destroying one of my gardeners."

"We're looking for a girl," said Tim.

"I don't know what you've been told about me, but I trade in pumpkins."

"Why pumpkins?" asked Julian. Tim didn't know whether Julian was sincerely interested in this crazy old man's hobbies, or whether this was some kind of Diplomacy tactic. Reluctantly, he kept his mouth shut.

Pep shrugged. "I like pumpkins."

"That doesn't seem very evil of you," said Julian.

That was maybe one of the least diplomatic sentences that Tim had ever heard. "What the hell are you –"

"I'm sorry," said Julian. "I just have to know. My understanding of the rules is that only evil clerics can make and control zombies."

"You got some gall, son," said the old man. "You trespass on my property, destroy one of my gardeners, and then you have the nerve to sit there and judge me while you sip my lemonade?"

"You misinterpret my meaning," said Julian, who didn't look at all worried about having just insulted a homicidal priest whose hobbies included murder for sport. "It's just the opposite, really. You have been a gracious and hospitable host, and I was second-guessing my

own preconceptions of good and evil.”

“Is that so?” said Pep. He stared ponderously at Julian.

“What is it about pumpkins that you like?”

“They grow quickly,” said Pep. His time-worn eyes sparkled with the fervor of someone who is talking about something they are truly passionate about. “The vines are strong and determined. They’ll climb up fences or trees, strangle the life out of anything weaker. You got pumpkins growing in yer garden, you can forget about tomatoes and asparagus. The pumpkins will take over everything.”

“Well I guess that’s pretty evi—”

“It’s my sister,” Tim interrupted. “The girl we’re looking for, that is. We have it on good authority that she has recently acquired a large pumpkin.”

“I was just getting around to that,” said Julian.

“How recently,” asked Pep, “does your good authority claim she has acquired this pumpkin?”

“Sometime last night,” said Tim.

Pep sat back in his chair and stroked the white stubble on his chin. “It’s not proper business etiquette to give away personal information about my customers,” he said. “But in Millard’s case, I could make an exception. The poor guy gets lonely up there in that old fort of his. He’d welcome the company.”

“Millard?”

“Now mind you,” Pep said abruptly. “If I was you, I wouldn’t go around asking questions about good and evil and all that.” He wagged a bony finger at Julian. “Curiosity is a good thing, I tell you, but that’s just bad form, it is.”

“I apologize,” said Julian. “It was not my intent to offend you.”

“No harm done here, my boy,” said Pep, smiling. His smile faded before he spoke again. He leaned forward in his chair. “But Millard, now. He’s a different sort than me. He’s sensitive, like. His feelings are fragile, so iff’n you want to go talk to him, you mind yer manners and watch what you say, hear?”

“Of course,” said Julian. “Where might we find this man, Millard?”

“Oh, findin’ him won’t be no trouble,” said Pep. “You know that mountain on the other side of town?”

“The dark and creepy one that casts a shadow over half of Cardinia?” asked Tim.

“That’s the one,” said Pep. “Grimblood Peak.”

“Sounds inviting,” said Tim.

“You just shimmy yer arses up to the top of that mountain, and you’ll find an old fortification. Been here since the Wars of the Fractured Kingdom. Fallen into some disrepair since then, it has. But you won’t have no trouble finding it.”

Chapter 11

“What kind of bullshit was that?” said Cooper through the open mouth of the least-convincing wolf costume Dave thought imaginable. He rubbed his ass with the palm of his hand. “That fucker shot me!”

Stuart grinned at him. His own costume was at least a little more convincing, as he could properly fit in it. “You were too slow. Too stupid. You need to keep moving, just like I was. Then you won’t get hit.”

“Dave,” said Cooper. “My ass hurts. Do you mind?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Dave. He touched Cooper on the arm. “I heal thee.” Cooper’s wounds immediately closed up.

“I heal thee?” asked Stuart. “That’s your healing incantation?”

“It’s just the first thing that came to mind,” said Dave. “Now it’s just habit.”

Stuart shook his head. “So lame. I’ve been meaning to ask you. What’s up with your furry arm?”

Dave quickly put his arm behind his back. “It’s just something that happened.”

Cooper pulled the wolf’s stretched out head off of his own. “What the fuck is this all about?”

“Put that back on, you idiot!” snapped Stuart. “Don’t blow your disguise!”

“Oh right,” said Cooper. He pulled the wolf head back on. “It’d be a shame if we stopped getting shot at.”

“That’s right,” said Stuart.

“You mean you’re *trying* to get shot at?” asked Dave.

“What the hell do you think we’re doing out here?” asked Stuart.

“I thought we were trying to steal pumpkins,” said Cooper. “You know, to feed everyone back at the Whore’s Head.”

“I can’t believe how thick you guys are,” said Stuart. He held up three blood-stained crossbow bolts. “He thinks we’re werewolves, so he shoots us with silver-tipped bolts. We clean them off and sell them for a gold piece each.”

Cooper nodded. “Not bad.”

“So go on out there and try again.”

“Fuck that,” said Cooper. “Those hurt.”

“Don’t be such a pussy,” said Stuart. “Watch and learn.” With that, he bolted out from the safety of the trees, jumped on a pumpkin and somersaulted into the air. He started a series of cartwheels which ended abruptly with a bolt in his throat.

“Shit!” said Dave.

“Cocky little bastard,” said Cooper, grinning. “Watch and learn, he

says.”

“Dude,” said Dave. “Go get him!”

“Goddammit,” said Cooper. “Fine.” He poked his head out to see if the coast was clear. It was not. A bolt struck the tree mere inches from his face. Cooper jerked his head back.

“Hurry up!” said Dave. “While he’s reloading!”

Cooper ran out into the pumpkin patch, waving his arms as if he was trying to fly. He took a bolt in the chest and another in the arm, but finally reached Stuart. On the way back, he attempted to shield himself with Stuart’s body, but still managed to catch a bolt in the ear. Pushing his luck, he also managed to grab the bolt out of the tree before ducking back to safety and dumping Stuart.

Stuart was in bad shape. His eyes were open, but Dave couldn’t even tell if he was conscious. He was choking on his own blood as it bubbled out of the hole in his neck.

Dave plucked the bolt out of Stuart’s neck and touched the wound. “I heal thee.”

The hole closed up nicely, which Dave hoped was a sign that he was still alive. The brief moment of silence that followed was interrupted by the call of a strange bird that Dave couldn’t identify. Two chirps and a whistle.

As if waking up from a horrific nightmare, Stuart opened his eyes and gasped. He rolled over on his side and coughed up what seemed like half a liter of blood. When he stopped coughing, he looked up and smiled weakly at Dave with red teeth. He held up a finger. “One... more... please.”

Dave touched him on the head. “I heal thee.”

Stuart puked up another thick glob of blood, and then finally resumed breathing normally. “Thanks.”

“How did that one bolt fuck you up so bad?” asked Cooper, wincing as he plucked the bolt out of his ear. “I mean, I know I’m bigger than you, but I got shot like six times.”

“Critical Hit,” said Stuart. “He must have rolled a natural 20, and then maybe another one on top of that.”

“Or maybe you’re just a big pussy,” offered Cooper, yanking the bolt out of his chest. “Ow.” Then the one from his leg. “Ow.” He dropped them on the ground. “Dave, do you mind? I’m leaking like a fucking fountain over here.”

Dave touched Cooper’s arm. “I heal thee.”

Cooper’s wounds closed up, leaving behind only streams of drying blood to mark where they had once been.

“I’m all tapped out of healing,” said Dave. “Maybe it’s time to call it a day.”

The strange bird from before called out again.

“What is that?” asked Dave.

“Tony the Elf is nearby,” said Stuart. “He’s checking on our condition.” He cupped his hand around the sides of his mouth and answered the call. “Cooooo! Yup yup!”

“What the fuck was that supposed to be?” asked Cooper.

“A bird,” said Stuart. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.” He started walking away from the pumpkin patch, back the way they had come from.

“A bird being stepped on?”

Stuart stopped abruptly and whirled around at Cooper. “You know what? I’m really getting sick of your mouth. I don’t care what Frank says. You’re not brave. You’re stupid and reckless. It’s not the same thing.”

Cooper pointed a thumb back at the pumpkin patch. “What do you call that stunt you just pulled out there? I just saved your life, dickhead.”

Stuart turned red in the face. “You wouldn’t have had to if I wasn’t doing your job for you.”

“Seriously dude. When the sun shines just the right way on your head, it really does kind of look like a dick. When you get all excited like this, I keep expecting semen to squirt out the top.”

“That’s it!” Stuart threw down his collection of silver-tipped bolts and put his fists up. “You wanna go? Let’s go.”

“Come on, guys,” said Dave. “Nobody’s fighting anybody. Let’s just get out of here.”

Cooper cracked his giant knuckles while Stuart danced around like Muhammad Ali.

“I have to warn you,” said Stuart. “My hands count as magical weapons. I have Ki Strike and Flurry of Blows.”

Cooper laughed so hard he lost control of his legs and bladder. It was a silent laughter, as he was unable to breathe. Dave laughed as well, but remained in control of his bodily functions.

Stuart lowered his fists. “What’s so goddamn funny?”

“Come on, man,” said Dave. “Flurry of Blows? You really kind of walked right into that one.”

Stuart walked around Cooper’s piss puddle and kicked him in the gut. “How old are you people?” He kicked him again. “I feel like I’m babysitting retarded kids.” Another kick.

Cooper got control over his laughter just enough to say “Cut it out. That hurts.” He resumed laughing.

“Everything’s a joke to you, isn’t it?” said Stuart, kicking Cooper one more time.

Cooper kept right on laughing, even as blood started to spill out of his mouth.

“Hey!” said Dave. “Stop it. You’re really hurting him!”

Stuart turned around and pointed a finger at Dave. “You’re next, dwarf. We’ll see how funny you think – WHA!”

Cooper kicked Stuart’s legs out from under him, sending him face first into the puddle of urine. He sat on Stuart’s head and rubbed his bruised ribs. “That was the worst Flurry of Blows I’ve ever had. I guess I should have bought him dinner first.”

Stuart’s arms and legs flailed about frantically beneath Cooper’s broad ass.

“Do you really think drowning him in your piss is going to rectify the situation.”

“Ha!” said Cooper. “You finally made a good joke, Dave.”

“What?”

Cooper wiggled his ass on Stuart. “I’m *rectifying* the situation.”

“Jesus, Cooper. Just get off him, will you? You’re going to kill him.”

“He was about to kill me,” said Cooper. “You saw him. I’ll just wait until he passes out, and we’ll carry him back to the Whore’s Head. I’ll apologize later.”

Bad as it was, Dave had to admit that Cooper’s plan was likely the safest course of action. Whether it was or not, the choice soon disappeared when Stuart’s limbs stopped moving.

Chapter 12

It was a long walk back to the Whore's Head, and Cooper didn't fancy explaining himself to Frank. For a gnome, that little guy was intense. Still, Stuart had attacked first, and Cooper honestly thought he was trying to kill him. It didn't help matters that Stuart woke up twice during the trip, and Cooper had had to punch him into submission again.

It was evening when Dave finally knocked on the tavern door. All conversation stopped as Cooper walked in carrying Stuart's limp body. His head was bruised, filthy, and lumpy. Cooper set him down on a table.

Rose, Stuart's wife, shrieked and ran to her husband. Cooper was mesmerized by the bounce of her steel-encased breasts.

Someone poked him, hard.

"Huh?" said Cooper.

"I said, what happened?" said Frank.

"We got into a fight," said Dave.

Frank glared up at Cooper. "What did I tell you about fighting with our people?"

Cooper lowered his head. "Not to."

"I'm sorry," said Frank, "But you guys are out. Grab your shit and go."

"Hold on a second," said Dave. He pointed at the battered monk on the table. "He started it!"

Frank crossed his little gnome arms and looked up at Dave incredulously. "So you're telling me Stuart just up and picked a fight with you two out of the blue?"

Dave looked down. "Well, Cooper may have provoked it."

"I don't believe it," said Frank. "Stuart isn't the sort to strike first. He's a monk."

"He's a dick," said Cooper.

Frank pointed at the door. "You get the hell out of my inn right now. If I have to –"

"Ask Stuart!" said Dave.

"What?" said Frank.

"Ask Stuart what happened."

"And what then? Even if what you say is true, he'll just deny it. Hell, I would. It'll be his word against yours, and guess whose word I'm gonna trust."

"Monks are Lawful," said Dave. "He'll be compelled to tell the truth."

Frank thought for a moment, a scowl on his face. "Fine," he said.

“You’re a healer. Wake him up. Let’s see what he has to say.”

“I’m all out of healing,” said Dave. “Werewolf duty was kind of rough.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” said Frank. “Barney!”

“Yeah, Frank?” said a fair-haired human at the back of the room.

“Did you sell all your healing potions today?”

“Got one left.”

“Bring it over here.”

Rose cradled her husband’s head as Barney poured the thick green liquid down his throat. Frank tapped his foot impatiently, arms folded, glaring at Cooper.

The bumps and bruises melted away from Stuart’s bald head, but the dirt and shit stains did not. He opened his eyes. “I’m alive?” He sat up.

“Barely,” said Frank. He pointed at Dave and Cooper. “These two had quite a story to tell.”

Stuart turned around and locked eyes with Cooper. “I’ll bet they did! Did they tell you how they defecated on my head and drowned me in urine?” Rose backed away from her husband and scowled.

“No,” said Dave. “We sort of skipped some of the finer details.”

“I didn’t actually take a shit on your head,” said Cooper. “I just have some trouble wiping is all.”

“Shut up,” said Frank. He looked at Stuart. “They told me you struck the first blow.”

“It was a flurry of them, actually,” said Cooper.

Dave snorted.

“I said shut up!” shouted Frank, glaring at Dave and Cooper. Dave got himself under control. Frank once again turned his attention to Stuart. “Tell me they’re lying, Stuart.”

Stuart crossed his legs, folded his hands, and bowed his head. “On my honor, I cannot. I admit I temporarily lost control of my senses, and my emotions got the better of me. I struck with anger in my heart, and for that I humbly apologize.”

“You know the rule,” said Frank. “I was just about to kick these guys out.”

Stuart’s face remained stoic, betraying no trace of relief or regret. “The rule must apply to everyone. If it is your judgment that I should leave this place, I will do so.”

“No, Frank!” said Rhonda. Rose shot her a wicked glare, but it was lost on her. “You know he was provoked. They admitted that much themselves. Make the half-orc go.”

“Frank,” said Rose gently, bending down to place her hand on his shoulder. “He’s my husband.” Her tits were right in his face. *Nice move, Rose.*

Frank shrugged off her hand and turned away, his face rather more flush than it had been before. "Goddammit, Stuart! You've put me in a hell of a position."

"Make your choice," said Dale. "I will honor it."

"No," said Frank. "I'll leave that decision up to the offended party. Carter?"

"Cooper," said Cooper.

"Whatever," said Frank. "You make the call. Does Stuart stay or go?"

Cooper looked at Stuart, who stood straight and expressionless. He looked past Stuart, where Rhonda was seething. He looked at Rose, who was looking uncomfortably away from him with her arms folded over her cleavage. Finally, he looked at Frank, who looked back at him with an expression of nervous expectation. "I don't give a fuck what he does, so long as he stops trying to murder me."

Frank let out a long, relieved exhalation. "You're a hell of a guy, Cooper. Come on. I owe you fellas an apology... and a drink."

Rose wrapped her arms around Stuart and kissed him on his cheek. A flicker of rage flashed across Stuart's face and then disappeared. He let himself be led away by his wife.

It wasn't until Tim, Julian, Gorgonzola, and Tony the Elf came in that Cooper realized how uncommonly quiet the place still was. Still no Katherine or Bard Guy, but no one was crying, so they were probably still alive. Tim was his usual sullen self. He looked like hell. Dark rings were starting to form under his eyes. He might have even lost some weight. He looked less like a child to Cooper now, and more like a tiny old person.

"What's going on?" asked Tony the Elf.

"Nothing," said Frank. "Just a little misunderstanding." He stood on a stool and addressed the crowd. "The show's over, folks. Get back to drinking." He stood there watching as glasses started clinking and conversation picked back up. When it reached a quiet din, he nodded his head and stepped down from the stool. "Did you find the halfling's sister?"

"We got another lead," said Tony the Elf. "We'll check it out in the morning."

"We're almost out of pig," said Frank. "I need you back out on the hunt tomorrow."

Tony the Elf looked down at Tim.

"We'll be okay," said Tim. "But I'll need Cooper and Dave with me tomorrow."

"Fine," said Frank. "I'm gonna go check on Stuart. You boys drink up."

"So," Tim said to Cooper. "How was werewolf duty?"

“Not bad. Kind of fun, really. What did you find out about Katherine and... and that bard dude? Whatever his name is.”

Tim took a long pull from his beer. “Looks like they’re holed up in some abandoned fortress on top of a mountain.”

“And that’s good news?” asked Dave.

“Who can say?” said Tim. “Thanks to their character sheets, we know they’re alive and healthy. If they’re being held in a dungeon or something, we’ll just rescue them. Serves them right for running off.”

As the four of them got down to the task of drinking, Dave, Cooper, Julian, and Tim shared versions of what was essentially the same story. About half an hour later, Frank returned to their table.

“Listen, fellas,” said Frank. “I don’t know how to put this.”

“What’s up?” said Cooper.

“It’s not always easy being the leader. I didn’t ask for this. It just kind of happened. It is what it is.”

Frank seemed to be skirting around some kind of point, but Cooper couldn’t make out what it was. “Do you want a hug or something?”

Frank shook his head and laughed. “Not from you, big guy. Thanks.” He put on his serious face again. “As a leader, sometimes you have to make difficult decisions. What I mean to say is, it was probably wrong for me to pass the decision about Stuart on to you.”

“Okay?”

“I think he would have rather I kicked him out than have you be the one to allow him to stay.”

“He wants to go?” asked Cooper, not quite sure if he was understanding this correctly. “Well that’s fine with me. Tell him not to let the door hit his ass on the way out.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” said Frank.

“Look, man,” said Cooper. “You’re going to have to spell this out for me. “I’m stupid, remember? And I’m a little drunk as well.”

“You hurt his pride.”

“His pride can suck my balls.”

“Anyway,” said Frank. “He’s all butt-hurt about this, and I think it’d be a big help if you and your buddies cleared out of here for a night. Let him simmer down a bit, you know?”

“You’re kicking us out?” said Tim.

“I’m asking you to spend one day and night away from here. Let some water pass under the bridge. Go camping or something.”

Dave held up his leopard skinned arm. “This is what happened the last time we went camping.”

“Then go spend a night in a nicer inn. Sleep in a bed. I’ll front you a couple of gold pieces. Go find your sister and take her out somewhere nice. When you come back, everything will be hunky-dory.”

Chapter 13

Tim, Cooper, Dave, and Julian followed Butterbean along a small trail through an ever darkening forest. The trees themselves were thin and spindly pines. They grew out of rocky soil and their pitiful needles looked more grey than green. The lack of other life was conspicuous. No birds flying around or squirrels chasing one another up tree trunks. The silence was disquieting, all the more so because Julian had the sneaking suspicion that it was a false silence. Something was out there, watching them, maybe even following them.

“Do you guys notice anything strange about this place?” asked Julian.

“Other than that it’s creepy as fuck?” offered Cooper.

“The elevation seems to be rising,” said Dave. “I’ll bet you that this leads up to that big cliff overlooking the city.”

“I wasn’t talking about the topography,” said Julian. “I feel like we’re being watched.”

“I’ll grant you it’s a creepy forest,” said Tim. “But don’t let your imagination run wild. Just stay close together and we’ll be okay. Butterbean looks like he’s still hot on some trail.”

Indeed, the wolf sniffed eagerly at the ground ahead of them, wagging its tail and barking, seemingly impatient for them to catch up. The party could only move as fast as Dave, who was trudging along slowly due to his short legs and the encumbrance of his armor.

It wasn’t long before the burning in Julian’s thighs told him that Dave was right. They were definitely traveling uphill. Every now and again, he’d catch a shadow flicker by in the corner of his vision, but turning quickly revealed nothing. He could feel that Ravenus shared his unease, and he’d sent the bird out a few times to fly in circles around the party, but he never brought back news of having seen anything.

Cooper stepped off the trail to pee. The steady trickle of urine on bark was the only sound for miles it seemed, until the ground gave way beneath him. On his way down, his dick must have hit a tree root or a rock or something.

“Fuck,” he said as he sprayed piss all over his face. He was standing upright, but he was only visible above the shoulder. The rest of him was submerged underground.

When he got his dick under control and spat the urine out of his mouth, he began to climb out of the hole. He had both arms and one leg out when he sank suddenly back into the hole.

“Yeeoooww!” he shouted. “Something’s got my foot!”

Tim and Dave grabbed his arms and pulled. Whatever it was that

had a hold of his foot from below wasn't letting go of its catch without a fight. Julian wanted to help, but couldn't find a convenient place to take hold of Cooper. He considered grabbing him by the ears, but didn't think that would be very helpful. Though Tim and Dave pulled as hard as they could, they were slowly losing the struggle. Cooper was sinking deeper into the hole.

If Julian could only get a line of sight on the creature, he could at least blast it with a Magic Missile. He leaned around every way that he could think of, but could catch sight of nothing between Cooper's huge body and the dust everyone was kicking up in the air.

Butterbean growled and barked. Ravenus flapped around in a panic. Tim's feet and Dave's boots scraped along the rocky ground. All of that was drowned out with one long wet fart.

Whatever had a hold of Cooper's foot let go. Cooper flew out of the hole, propelled by Tim, Dave, and possibly his own flatulence.

Dave immediately crawled over and laid a healing hand on Cooper's shredded foot. "I heal thee."

Julian wanted to watch the skin on Cooper's foot mend itself. It was a gruesome, yet fantastic sight that he had been witness to in the past. But there was no time. The creature, having braved its way through Cooper's fart, finally showed its face.

"What the hell is that?" asked Julian. A furry head looked back at him. It was long and brown, with a white stripe running from the top of its head down to its nose. Its mouth dripped blood and strips of Cooper's foot.

"It's a badger," said Tim.

"Like hell it is," said Julian. "That thing is bigger than I am!"

"It's a dire badger," said Dave. He and Cooper were now back on their feet. Cooper was limping as his wound was only partially healed.

"Oh come on," said Julian. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard of. Do you mean to tell me that – Hey, where's Tim?" Julian looked back at the spot where Tim had been standing, but Tim was gone.

The ground began to rumble under Julian's feet. He leapt out of the way just in time to avoid a second dire badger head poking out of the ground.

"Jesus!" he shouted, scrambling up to his feet. He stumbled backward a couple of steps and raised his hand toward the badger. "Have some!" The Magic Missile struck the badger just below the chin, singeing its fur and pissing it off. It looked at Julian with an expression in its eyes that he had seen only in one other living creature. "Cooper!"

The badger climbed out of its burrow like a furry snake with Hulk arms, hissing and drooling, eyes locked on Julian. He mumbled a

protective spell just in time to wrap his body in a faint blue light which caught the creature's first swipe. The claws were razor sharp, and as long as Julian's fingers. If they could burrow through this stony ground, his meager spell was only going to offer a modicum of protection.

The second claw proved Julian's assessment correct, ripping through the blue light, through his serape, and into his chest. Julian screamed, but the badger wasn't done with him. It lunged forward at him, biting deep into the muscles and tendons between his neck and shoulder.

Julian and the badger rolled on the ground before he finally broke free. It had taken a souvenir. Julian's vision swam when he saw his own flesh hanging from the badger's teeth. He was too shocked to feel pain just yet, but he could feel the weakness setting in from loss of blood.

Butterbean tore into the badger's side with his teeth. Even Ravenus flew down and pecked at its head. The badger didn't even seem to notice. Its eyes never left Julian.

"Dave," Julian called out weakly, making an effort not to throw up when he spoke. Dave was occupied fending off attacks from the other badger. He was alone. Where was Cooper? Where was Tim?

Cooper, as it turned out, was right behind him. "I'm really angry!" he shouted. He brought his axe down on the badger's back, not seeming to notice or care that he almost chopped Ravenus in half.

The badger was in bad shape, bleeding at least as badly as Julian was, but it didn't even spare Cooper a glance. It tensed its body for another lunge at Julian and was just about to strike when something fell out of the tree above it.

It was Tim, dropping down on the giant badger, sword-point first, with his entire weight behind it. This finally brought the beast out of its homicidal frenzy. It hissed and howled, spraying blood and spittle all over Cooper while Tim twisted the blade and scrambled its insides.

As the light of life faded out of the creature's eyes, Julian's attention was suddenly refocused on Dave's cries for help. He looked over to see Dave squaring off with the other badger all by himself. Both of them were splattered in blood. It was impossible to tell whose was whose, but from the way Dave was staggering, Julian guessed that at least some of it was his.

Cooper was the first to Dave's assistance. "Fuck you, badger!" he shouted, the thunder in his voice shaking the air around them. His axe missed the badger, but sliced straight through the trunk of a tree. The poor wretched pine didn't have a chance. It exploded into splinters where the axe met its trunk, and began to fall.

Dave stepped up, looked the badger in the eye, and spat out a gob

of blood. A growing hatred for animals burned bright in his eyes, and bristled on the leopard fur of his forearm.

“Why the long face?” he said, swinging his mace with two hands into the badger’s elongated head. The sound of crunching bone briefly eclipsed the sound of falling tree. But that big bastard was still on its feet.

Julian, barely able to sit up, made his own scant contribution to the fight. He raised an arm that felt like it was made out of lead, pointed a finger weakly at the badger and breathed the words “Have some.” This Magic Missile sputtered and sparked as it flew, but eventually it found its way to the badger’s ass. That furry bastard wouldn’t be ordering Mexican food anytime soon.

Tim pulled his sword out of the dead badger, looked up to see a tree falling down on him, and dove out of the way. Butterbean made it out of the way as well. Ravenus was not so lucky. He got caught up in a tangle of branches and was slammed into the rocky ground.

Julian could feel Ravenus’s fear as he was forced to the ground. He felt a sensation like having the air suddenly forced out of his lungs when the tree landed. It was too much. He fell on his back and passed out.

He awoke some time later. That was a pleasant surprise. It was later in the day, probably nearing evening. The darkness and grimness of the forest had become a bit darker and grimmer. He sat up.

“Ravenus!”

“We’re all fine, thanks,” said Cooper, sitting on a rock right next to him.

“Where’s Ravenus?”

“Your fucking bird is fine.”

Ravenus hopped out from behind a nearby tree. He raised a wing. “So happy to see you awake, sir. I’m afraid I took a bit of a tumble.”

“What’s wrong with your wing?”

“It might be broken.”

“Dave!” Julian called out. “Do you have any heals left?”

“I was saving one for you,” said Dave, wiping blood and bits of bone from his mace.

“I’m fine,” said Julian. “Ravenus has a broken wing.”

“You’re not fine,” said Dave. “We patched you up, but you’re still at only a quarter of your full hit points.”

“I told you he wouldn’t go for it,” said Tim.

“Listen,” said Dave. “Your affection for this fictional bird is charming, but we need to –”

“He’s not a fictional bird,” said Julian. “He’s right fucking here.”

“We’re in a game. If the bird dies, well, he never really existed to begin with. If you die...” He shrugged.

Julian struggled to his feet, only now feeling the intense pain between his neck and shoulder. It had been covered with strips of his serape. "Heal Ravenus, or I won't accept any healing."

"You're not thinking straight!" said Dave, anger brewing in his voice. "We're in a dangerous forest. This is my last fucking spell. If I waste it on a bird, you are probably going to die if we run into anymore badgers, or whatever. There could be worse things out there. And who knows what we're going to be up against if we find Katherine?"

"Zero level," said Tim. Julian and Dave looked at him. Cooper scratched his ass.

"What?" said Dave.

"Do you have any zero level healing spells available?"

"Those only heal one hit point a piece. They're next to worthless."

"Worthless for a full grown multi-level adult with a serious injury, maybe," said Tim. "But what about for a bird with a broken wing?"

Two zero level healing spells were all it took to bring Ravenus back up to his full health. Dave's remaining first level spell brought Julian back up to minor scrapes and bruises.

"Well that's it," said Dave. "My healing is all tapped out. How much farther do you think we'll have to climb before we get to wherever the hell it is that we're going?"

Tim looked at Butterbean, and then at Ravenus. "Ravenus, you can't talk to wolves, can you?"

"What makes you think that I'd be able to talk to wolves?" said Ravenus.

"Just a shot in the dark." Tim's shoulders dropped. "There's no way to know."

"We're not going to be able to stand another attack," said Dave.

"Well I'm not going back without finding Katherine," said Tim.

"Julian. Do you have any of those horse spells?"

"You mean Mount?"

Cooper giggled.

"Shut up, Cooper," said Tim. "Yeah. Do you have any Mounts?" He gave Cooper a warning look. Cooper held in the laugh.

"I used up two first level spells with those Magic Missiles," said Julian. "I've got two more left. So I can summon two horses if we need them."

"I think it's our best shot," said Tim. "We'll ride the magic horses as far as we can. If anything attacks us, we'll just hope we can outrun it." He looked around for any naysayers.

"It's as good a plan as any," said Dave. "Personally, I don't like our odds of surviving even if we turned back now on foot."

"All right," said Tim. "Let's not waste any more time then. It's

getting late, and I would really like to limit the time we spend out here in the dark.”

“Horse,” said Julian. A light grey horse appeared before him, complete with saddle, bit, and bridle.”

“Cooper,” said Tim. “See if that horse can carry your weight.”

Cooper mounted the horse, which didn’t seem bothered at all by his weight.

“Okay good,” said Tim. “Help me up. If he can carry you, I shouldn’t be much more of a burden to him.”

“Horse,” Julian said again. This time a black horse appeared, but otherwise this horse was identical to the first one. “I guess we’re riding together,” he said to Dave.

Julian mounted the horse with ease. Dave needed Cooper to lift him up by the arm.

“Let’s go,” said Tim. “Butterbean, find Katherine.” Butterbean barked, and started running up the trail.

“Go, horse!” said Julian. “Go fast!” His horse did as commanded, and the other horse followed. Julian shouted to Ravenus over the sound of galloping hooves. “Fly ahead and look out for danger.”

Ravenus, ever faithful to his master, did as he was bid.

They galloped for what seemed like an hour, the horses not once showing any signs of exhaustion. The forest grew less dense as they climbed until it was completely free of trees. Scraggly bushes clung to their pitiful lives through the cracks of rocks here and there, but the ground was mostly barren. The trail turned into a crumbling road, leading still higher aside a sheer cliff face. On the other side was open space. The road would have been comfortably wide enough for the horses to travel side by side if there were solid ground on both sides. But there was nothing comfortable about riding next to a fifteen hundred foot drop, so the horses remained in single file.

Julian pulled on his reins. “We’d better take it slow now.” He brought his horse to a trot. The one behind him followed suit.

“Why?” asked Cooper.

“These horses are only good for two hours. Have you been keeping track of the time?”

“No. I seem to have left my stopwatch in my other loincloth.”

“If we’re riding at full gallop when the spell’s duration runs out, they’ll disappear right out from under us, and we might even go sliding off the edge of this cliff.”

“He’s right,” said Tim. “Anyway, I don’t feel quite as vulnerable out here in the open as I did in that forest.”

“Yeah,” said Julian. “We should be relatively safe from dire squirrels out here. How much farther up does this thing go?” He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Ravenus!”

Within seconds the black silhouette appeared against the purple evening sky. Ravenus flapped down to land on Julian's ready arm. "Sir?"

"How much farther up is it to the top?"

"Not much farther now."

"Good," said Tim in a British accent. "What's up there?"

"A keep," said Ravenus.

Dave practiced his vowel shifts. "Right. 'ello. Guvnor. Scone." Everyone looked at him. The Elven tongue was still new to him. "That could be very good for us," he said slowly and deliberately. "Or it could be very bad."

"What the fuck are all of you guys talking about?" asked Cooper, who couldn't understand the Elven language.

With some relief in his voice, Dave switched back to the common tongue. "Ravenus said there's a keep at the top of this mountain."

"That's great news," said Cooper.

Dave tugged at his beard. "Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe?" said Cooper. "We'll throw the owner a couple of coins, sleep there for the night, replenish your spells."

"Cooper," said Tim. "We followed Butterbean up here to find Katherine. If she's here, then she's probably being kept here against her will, which means whoever owns this place is probably an asshole who is going to try to murder us all."

"I concede you may have found a potential flaw in my logic," said Cooper.

"It doesn't matter," said Tim. "We don't have a lot of options available to us." As if on cue, the two horses winked out of existence, one right after the other. "And there go two more. Let's get up there and survey the scene."

Ten minutes later they reached the point where the ground flattened. Butterbean was waiting for them. They peeked over the edge of the rocky wall just before it evened up with the ground. The ground here was as bleak and barren as the side of the mountain. Nothing broke the dreary greyness of the landscape.

Nothing, that is, but a small stone keep, as Ravenus had reported, and about two dozen zombies, which Ravenus had failed to mention. For now, the zombies paid them no mind.

"Fuck," said Cooper. "If I'm lucky, I might be able to take down five or six of those."

"Undead aren't vulnerable to sneak attacks," said Tim glumly. "I'll be doing good to take one with me while the others rip me to pieces."

"I'm pretty much fucked," said Julian. "I'm out of spells."

"I could try turning them," said Dave. "It's been a while since I played a cleric, and I don't quite remember how turning works."

"Do you have a holy symbol?" asked Tim.

"Yeah," said Dave. "I bought one in the market yesterday." He pulled out a round wooden carving of the sun with a face on it."

"Does that represent a god?" asked Julian.

"Yeah," said Dave. "I guess."

"I thought you didn't choose to follow a god. Which one is that?"

"I don't know. I asked the guy at the shop for a holy symbol of a god of healing or destruction. He gave me this."

"How does it work?" asked Julian.

"Hell if I know."

"Just point it at the zombies and say something," said Tim. "As long as your intention is to turn them, it should work. That should put the odds more in our favor, or at least give us a bit of breathing room."

"Okay," said Tim. He was breathing quickly as he spit out the plan he was obviously making up there and then. "Dave and Cooper, you guys take the lead. Don't go out too far. You don't want to get surrounded in case we need to retreat. I'll run out next with Butterbean. We'll try to take down whatever Dave's turning doesn't cover. Julian... I don't know. Cheer us on or something."

"Fuck that," said Julian. "I want in on this action. There must be something I can do."

"Wave your stick at them," suggested Cooper.

"Screw you."

"No," said Tim. "Cooper's not far off. Do you have any torches?"

"No," said Julian. "But I've got oil."

"I've got a torch," said Dave.

"Good," said Tim. "Go back down the road a bit and light it up. I'm pretty sure these fuckers are susceptible to fire." Dave hurried back down the road far enough so that lighting a fire shouldn't provoke any unwanted attention until they were ready. "Julian. After we all make our move, you start throwing flasks of oil at any of those things that are still on their feet. When you get an opening, light the fuckers up. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Listen guys," Tim continued. "Once they're on fire, just back off and let them burn. The last thing you want is a flaming zombie hug."

Dave passed the lit torch to Julian. He readied his mace in one hand and his holy symbol in the other. Cooper held his axe with both hands. They looked at one another, nodded, and stepped out onto the flat ground.

"Try to get them to group together," said Dave, "so I can turn as many as possible in one go."

"Hey cocksuckers!" Cooper shouted. "I've got some fresh meat for you right here." Julian couldn't see Cooper, but he had no doubt that

Cooper was waving his dick at the zombies.

"All right," said Dave. "Here they come."

"Those guys can really move when they've got somewhere to go," said Cooper.

Julian lowered the torch and peeked above the flat ground level. Zombies moaned and dragged their feet as they walked hurriedly to feast on Dave and Cooper's flesh. The party was surrounded on all sides but the trail they'd come up from.

Dave held up his holy symbol and pointed it at the largest congregation of zombies. "In the name of... um... whoever this symbol represents, I compel thee to... um... turn?"

A single zombie shrieked and fled in terror. The gap he left behind was quickly filled in by the growing multitude.

"Fuck," said Dave. "That sucked." He swung his mace into the ribcage of a naked dead man, just below his outstretched arm. The ribs crunched, but the zombie didn't seem at all concerned by it.

Tim fired his crossbow into the zombie that Dave had attacked. The bolt hit its mark square in the face, burrowing upward from the cheek into whatever remained of its brain. It staggered backward for two steps.

Butterbean and Ravenus set upon it like savages. Ravenus pulled one of its eyes out of its head, flapping away before the thing could claw at its own face. Butterbean ripped a chunk of muscle off of its right upper thigh.

Whether from lack of vision, loss of leg muscle, or scrambled coordination, the zombie staggered around in a circle for a few steps before stepping right off the edge of the cliff.

"Julian!" shouted Dave. "Anytime you're ready with that oil!"

Shit. Julian knew he should have prepared that already. With the torch in one hand, he rummaged through his backpack with the other hand until it wrapped around a smooth glass flask. The crowd up above was large enough such that he didn't even bother looking to see where he was throwing it. Hopefully he'd splash a bunch of them. He could spend a couple of rounds down here making sure the crowd was good and saturated, chuck the torch into the middle of it, and watch zombie chaos ensue.

Zombie moans were being silenced by axe and mace up above him. Julian threw his first flask over the ledge.

"Ow!" shouted Dave just after the sound of breaking glass.

Shit. "Sorry!" shouted Julian.

"Dammit, Julian! It's all over my hair! Watch where you're throwing that shit!"

Julian scurried up the path to get a clear shot for his next flask of oil. There were zombies everywhere. He leaned the torch against a

rock and dug into his pack with both hands.

“Hurry the fuck up, Julian!” shouted Cooper. “I can’t hold these fuckers up forev—Argh!”

“What happened?” asked Dave. He held one zombie at bay with his shield while caving in the skull of another with his mace.

“Fucker bit me!” said Cooper. He dug a clawed thumb into the eye socket of the zombie gnawing his arm, got a solid grip on it, and ripped its head clean off. As he was throwing it into the crowd, another zombie caught his uninjured arm and bit down.

Julian threw two flasks of oil into the middle of the crowd and dug around for two more.

Tim fired a bolt into the back of the zombie on Cooper’s arm, but it didn’t even seem to notice. “Julian!” he shouted. “Throw the goddam torch already! You can throw more oil once the fire gets going!”

Julian ignored him, as he already had two more flasks ready to go. A zombie broke from the crowd and lumbered toward him. He nearly dropped the flasks out of fear, but Butterbean came in from the side and tackled the zombie. Julian threw the oil. At least one of the flasks made a good splash on the crowd.

Dave took a swipe at the zombie on Cooper’s arm, crushing its spine. The creature’s legs went limp, but he still held on to Cooper with arms and teeth.

“Goddamnit!” Cooper shouted. He ignored the zombie on his arm for now in favor of not inviting another one to eat him. He brought his axe down on an approaching zombie’s shoulder, cutting down to its chest. “Light these fuckers up!”

Julian picked up the torch and threw it into the crowd, making his best judgment as to where he thought it might have a good chance of catching some oil. His heart stopped for two seconds while nothing happened. He had failed and they were all going to be eaten alive by zombies because of it.

But he hadn’t failed. A warm woosh of air blew his hair back as the darkness became light. Moans turned into screams as confused zombies waved their fiery arms around, spreading the flames to each other.

The zombies on the edge tried to move away, but their lack of coordination kept them bumping into one another in a panicked frenzy to escape the flames. Tim took aim at one which seemed like it might be moving in the right direction and shot it in the face.

Cooper left his axe buried in the torso of the last zombie he’d chopped, and tore himself free from the half paralyzed body still gnawing on his arm. He lifted the body over his head and threw it into the flaming mass of walking corpses.

Tim picked off stragglers while Dave tended to Cooper’s wounds.

“Is he going to be okay?” asked Julian.

“They got his arms pretty good,” said Dave, tearing a strip of cloth from Julian’s rapidly shrinking serape. He tied it around the bleeding tooth marks on Cooper’s left arm. “But if we can keep from being attacked for five fucking minutes, he should pull through.”

Julian tore off another strip of cloth for Cooper’s other arm. “But,” he paused. “I mean... Is he going to turn into...” he looked at the fiery crowd of screaming zombies. “one of them?”

Dave looked at Julian and smiled sympathetically, as if he were on the inside of some joke that Julian wasn’t privy to.

“No,” said Dave. “These aren’t movie zombies. They don’t spread a zombie disease. They are just dead people that have been animated by some kind of necromancer.”

Julian let out a long, steady breath.

“Don’t get comfortable just yet,” said Tim, taking aim at a wondering zombie which was completely engulfed in flames. He fired. It collapsed into a burning heap. “How do you think that necromancer is going to feel when he sees that we’ve destroyed all of his handiwork down here?”

Julian frowned and looked at the dark stone keep. Something shimmered in the doorway. And then there were two somethings.

“Um... guys?”

“What is it?” asked Dave.

“We’re about to make some new friends.”

Chapter 14

Cooper, Dave, and Tim looked toward the keep. Two men, as wide as city buses, clad from head to toe in black metal armor, drew swords with blades that Julian thought he might be able to surf on.

“Julian?” said Tim.

Julian took the cue. In any situation that might require some friendly words to diffuse an otherwise violent confrontation, he was responsible. He put his arms out in a gesture of peace and smiled.

“Gentlemen!” he said.

The men in the black armor did not appear to have succumbed to his charm. They did not pause in their advance. Julian began walking backwards, away from them.

“We don’t want any trouble,” said Tim, making a token gesture of pointing his crossbow at them. If they noticed it through their visored helmets, they gave no indication.

“These guys are some bad ass mother fuckers,” Julian heard Cooper whisper behind him. The truth of the words made Julian’s heart sink. Cooper was supposed to be the bad ass mother fucker around here. On the bright side, these guys might offer them a swifter and cleaner death than the zombies would have.

Cooper stood on wobbly legs and readied his axe. “Focus your efforts on the one on the left,” he said. “If we’re lucky, we might be able to drag one of these bastards to hell with us.”

Dave nodded his agreement and shifted his mace to a left-swinging grip.

The two men continued forward, slowly and almost silently. The slow pace at which they walked didn’t seem to be born of caution. It felt more like they just couldn’t be bothered to hurry, not on account of these four idiot weaklings who were in way over their heads.

“Fuck this,” said Tim. He shot his crossbow at the one on the left, as Cooper had instructed. The bolt bounce harmlessly off the black armor, not so much as scuffing it. “We’re so fucked.”

“That’s enough, Millard,” came a female voice from above, like a guardian angel in the night. Julian and Tim’s gazes darted upward to the top of the keep. There was Katherine... and some dude.

“Horace! Boris!” shouted the guy standing next to Katherine. “Stand down and lower your weapons! These men shall be my guests tonight. Please show them in.”

“Katherine?” Tim called out.

Katherine waved her arm wildly. “Hey Tim!”

“We’ve been looking all over for you!”

“Been here the whole time!”

“You inconsiderate bitch!” Tim was losing his shit. “Do you know how –”

Cooper wrapped a hand around Tim’s face to shut him up. “Something’s off,” he said. “I’ve never seen your sister that happy.” The fury left Tim’s eyes. He raised an eyebrow. “Just chill the fuck out until we see what’s going on, okay?” Tim nodded.

They followed the guards to the entrance of the keep. They stopped just shy of the door and turned around. One of them opened a large wooden crate. The inside was empty.

“Weapons,” said the guard by the crate.

Julian shrugged and tossed his quarterstaff inside.

Tim set his crossbow gently down and started to back away. The guard lifted him off the ground with one enormous hand. He held his other hand out to the other guard, who proceeded to remove his gauntlet. His hand exposed, Julian took note that it was, in fact, a human hand. With his bare hand, the guard removed the small bolt quiver from Tim’s belt. Then he felt around Tim’s person until he uncovered a small knife tucked away in his boot. These he threw unceremoniously into the crate.

Cooper surrendered his axe and Dave surrendered his mace. The bare-handed guard grabbed Dave by the neck, twisted his fingers around the twine that his holy symbol hung from, and yanked it free. He raised his visor. His jawbone must have been bigger than Julian’s pelvic bone. He horked up a gob of phlegm, and spit it onto the holy symbol in his palm. Then he threw it hard into the crate.

The other guard knocked on one of the huge double doors. A faint red light, like a laser pointer, shone through the crack between the doors. It started at the top and scanned down slowly until it reached the floor. Each guard grabbed a handle and pulled the doors slowly open.

Katherine stood looking absolutely radiant in a white, cleavage-enhancing gown. It was slit up one side, making everyone’s eyes but Tim’s follow the skin all the way up her impossibly long leg. Julian adjusted the scant remains of his serape to hide an imminent erection. Cooper made no effort to conceal the bulge rising forth from his loincloth.

To her right and slightly behind her stood a tall, distinguished looking man wearing a velvet purple cape over a black suit of leather armor, and managing to pull it off as imposing rather than ridiculous. Julian wondered if this was the look Mordred had been going for when he first met him at the Chicken Hut. If so, Mordred had failed horribly.

Tim wore a determinedly stern look on his face, which gave way to confusion as Katherine smiled broadly and rushed right by him

without so much as a glance. She bent down on her exposed knee and stretched her arms out wide.

"Butterbean!" she cried. The white wolf put its forepaws on her shoulder and licked her face eagerly. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his fur. "I've missed you so much!"

"Hey, sis," said Tim. His face had gone back to its normal state of mild annoyance. "Glad to see you're okay. "

Katherine turned her head back, as if startled to see them standing there. "Oh, hey guys. What's going on? Have you met Millard?"

"No," said Tim, his face flushing. "We haven't met fucking Mil—"

"I'm afraid," said Julian forcefully enough to cut Tim off, "we haven't yet had the pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine," said the tall man still standing in the doorway who Julian presumed to be Millard. "Won't you come in?" He stepped to the side and lifted his left arm in a welcoming gesture.

"No thanks," said Tim curtly. "I'll just be taking my sister and going, if it's all the same to you."

Katherine stood up and pointed an angry finger down at Tim. "You're being rude, and I'm not going anywhere. I like it here."

"You what?" said Tim. "This guy is bad news, Katherine. He has fucking zombies patrolling the grounds."

"Had," said Millard, frowning.

"I've had enough of this bullshit," said Tim. "Cooper, pick her up."

Cooper stood mesmerized by Katherine's cleavage. Tim kicked him hard in the shin.

"Huh?" Cooper broke free from his trance, but the bulge in his loincloth threatened to poke out one of Tim's eyes if he turned quickly enough.

"Don't be foolish," said Millard. "You boys look tired. Come, rest and dine with us, and we'll see if we can't reach an understanding."

Tim stood where he was and seethed.

"We need the rest," said Dave. "We'll never make it back to the city alive. We're spent."

"And I'm hungry," said Cooper. He walked into the open doorway and Dave followed.

"Come on, Tim," said Julian. "There's no point in standing out here pretending we have a choice."

"And what about Butterbean?" Tim snapped at his sister. "Are you going to just abandon your Animal Companion again? Leave him out here in the cold with these two butchers?"

Katherine looked to Millard for the answer.

"The dog may enter," said Millard. "But it would behoove you to make sure he minds his manners. And when your friends depart in the morning, the dog goes with them."

“Of course!” said Katherine, uncharacteristically giddily. “Do you hear that, Butterbean? You can come in, but you need to promise to be a good boy.”

Butterbean let out a sharp bark and licked her face.

Tim stood next to Julian. “This is wrong,” he said just loud enough for Julian to hear. “That’s not my sister.”

“Let’s get inside. We’ll figure this out.”

They walked inside, Julian’s attention was immediately drawn to a ten-foot square mural of their host. He wore a feathered cap and a stupid grin. It looked like a Glamour Shot, but without any of the class and sophistication commonly associated with that brand. The giant wooden doors thudded closed behind them. It was chilly inside, but well lit. The source of the light came from copper bowls resting on iron sconces mounted regularly along the stone walls, with a heavy concentration of them lined up under the painting. It didn’t flicker like fire. It was as soft and steady as an electric bulb. Julian stood on his toes to peek inside one of the copper bowls, and found a glowing stone inside it. He recognized immediately that he was looking at a stone enchanted with the Light spell.

Millard walked past the group into another room. “Come,” he said. “Sit at my table and rest. Katherine, you may sit at the table with your friends.”

The dining table was long and expensive looking. Two elves on either end of it might be able to converse normally, but two humans would have to raise their voices to be heard. The centerpiece was a set of copper scales, balanced with a Light stone on either side.

“Do you have a bathroom?” Cooper asked Millard. Only now did he seem to be aware of his massive erection. He was failing at an attempt to casually hide it by resting his hands on the end of it.

Millard looked no more comfortable than Cooper, trying to look at anything but the giant half-orc cock pointing at him. He waved a hand at a hallway. “Down there. Last door on the left.”

“Thank you,” said Cooper. He hurried down the hall.

“Stay to the left!” Millard called after him. He looked more annoyed than Julian thought was appropriate, given all of the circumstances. “Bard!” he shouted into another doorway.

Chaz sprang into the room with his lute. “At your command, sir!” He looked surprisingly healthy, considering the state he’d been in the last time Julian saw him. He had dark circles under his eyes, and he moved like a scared rabbit, but the color was back in his cheeks and he didn’t look to be at Death’s door anymore. His body must have finally rid itself completely of troll venom.

Millard smiled warmly. “Some music for our guests, please. Perhaps *The Ballad of the Cracked Rose*?”

"Of course, sir," said Chaz with a slight bow.

"If you'll excuse me," said Millard, "I must attend to matters in the kitchen." He gestured to a large silver jug, surrounded by matching silver cups, at the center of the table. "Help yourselves to some wine." He walked past Chaz into the doorway which Chaz had come from.

Chaz plucked away at the strings on his lute. The tune was instantly familiar to Julian, but he couldn't quite place where he'd heard it before. Maybe in his parents' car? When Chaz began singing, Julian found that he could almost sing along. "What is this song?"

"*Cracklin' Rosie*," said Dave, strumming his sausage-like dwarven fingers on the table to the music. "I love this song."

Tim stood up and walked hurriedly to Chaz. "Dude, knock it off for a second."

Chaz didn't miss a note. He looked down at Tim and shook his head as he sang.

"Are you okay?" asked Tim.

Chaz continued singing. He shrugged slightly and nodded.

Tim bit his lower lip. He looked back at his sister. She was sitting the table quietly humming along with Chaz's song and staring at nothing in particular. He looked back up at Chaz. "Have you noticed that Katherine's been acting strange?"

Chaz nodded his head vigorously as he sang.

Cold night wind blew through the doorway which Millard had retreated through. It stopped just as suddenly with the sound of slamming wooden shutters. A second later, the music stopped.

"Dude," said Chaz. "You've got to get us out of here."

"Chaz!" said Katherine. "I don't think anyone told you to stop singing."

"Shut the fuck up, Kat!" said Chaz.

Tim punched him in the dick. "That's my sister."

"Millard won't be pleased if –"

"Shut the fuck up, Kat!" said Tim. "What's going on, Chaz?"

"Millard is a vampire."

"Ooh!" said Julian. "I was going to guess that!"

"You're very clever," said Tim. He turned back to Chaz. "Has he been draining your blood?"

"No."

"Is he fucking my sister?"

"Tim!" shouted Katherine.

"Shut up, Katherine. Something is fucked up around here, and I'm going to find out what's going on. Chaz?"

Chaz stammered, apparently not knowing what to say.

"Chaz!"

"Jesus, I don't know. Not in front of me."

"Millard," said Katherine, "has been a perfect gentleman."

"Well that explains you being dressed up like a space-whore."

Dave stifled a laugh just a moment too late. "Not cool, man."

"To Katherine's credit," said Chaz, "the guy has gone out of his way to be hospitable."

"It doesn't make any sense," said Tim. "If he's not feeding off you, and he's not fucking you, then why is he keeping you here as prisoners?"

"I'm here of my own free will," said Katherine.

"That's bullshit," said Chaz, almost pleadingly. "He's got her under some kind of trance."

"I know," said Tim. "That much is obvious."

"Why is it so hard for you to believe that I actually like being here?"

"She's got a point," said Dave. "It's a nice enough place if you don't go outside."

"And the food is good," said Chaz. "You guys are in for a treat when he gets back."

"So if everything's so great around here," said Tim, "then why are you so keen for us to bust you out of here?"

"Well," said Chaz. "He's a vampire. That's pretty terrifying by itself. But there's also the torture."

"He tortures you?"

"Not physically."

Tim closed his eyes. "Chaz, I don't have the patience for riddles right now. What are you talking about?"

"Neil Diamond."

Julian spoke quickly to keep Tim from punching Chaz in the dick again. "What about him?"

"When we first arrived, he asked me to play him a song. I thought my life was on the line, so I started strumming the first song that popped into my head. *Forever in Blue Jeans*."

"So?" asked Tim.

"The fucker went nuts," said Chaz. "He said he'd never heard anything like that before. Ever since then it's been Neil fucking Diamond."

"That doesn't sound so bad," said Tim. "Everybody likes Neil Diamond, and he's got a lot of songs."

"I only know four!" said Chaz. "If I have to sing *Holly Holy* one more time, I'm going to jump out of a fucking window."

"I like that song," said Dave.

"Who's Neil Diamond?" asked Julian. He looked at Ravenus, who seemed to be the only one paying any attention to him. Ravenus shrugged.

"I still don't get it," said Tim. "So he's keeping you here for the music. Why is he keeping Katherine locked up in here?"

"Do you see any chains on my wrists?" said Katherine.

"I think he's lonely," said Chaz. "I don't think he's been a vampire for very long.

"What makes you say that?"

"He's not very good at it."

"Go on."

"I've always thought vampires were supposed to be these badass loners who take what they want and don't give a damn about what society thinks of them. People are just cattle, you know?"

"Yeah?" said Tim.

"And this Millard guy seems to be trying to go for that image, but he's not pulling it off very well. He's got his nice house, and it's decorated tastefully enough for the most part. But did you see that giant painting on the wall when you entered?"

"The one of himself?"

"Yeah!" said Chaz. "Who does that?"

"Maybe he just has a really high opinion of himself," suggested Dave.

"I've no doubt he wants to," said Chaz. "I kind of feel bad for him. He's like the fat rich kid in school with a bunch of expensive toys and no friends. He's just overly eager to impress people. You'll see what I mean when he brings back dinner."

"It's not going to be a human baby or anything, is it?" asked Julian.

"No," said Chaz. "Like I said, the food here is really good. Just do yourselves a favor and try to look impressed."

"Why don't we just grab Katherine and get the hell out of here while he's gone?" asked Dave.

"Bring it, Papa Smurf," said Katherine. "If you think you can take me."

"Sorry," said Dave. "I'm just thinking out loud."

"You guys are being cruel," said Katherine. "Millard is a really sweet guy once you get to know him."

"Listen," Dave said to Tim. "Katherine seems to be safe enough here for right now. But what about the rest of us? If we don't take this chance to bounce while he's away, what makes you think he's going to ever let us go? I mean, if he's that lonely... I'll remind you that we've been stripped of our weapons. We aren't going to be able to take down a vampire."

"He'll let us go," said Tim. "If he keeps Katherine here, he knows we'll come back to visit her. Anyway, two permanent guests ought to be enough for him. Six guests, and a wolf and a bird... nobody wants that in their house all the time. And once he spends any appreciable

amount of time with Cooper, I don't think he'll be able to show us to the door fast enough."

"Where is Cooper?" asked Julian. "He's been gone a while."

"I got lost," said Cooper, emerging from the doorway he'd disappeared through before. His loincloth was noticeably bereft of conspicuous bulges.

"Last door on the left," said Dave. "How could you get lost? You only had one direction to follow."

"Fuck you, Dave," said Cooper. "I got confused. You know that trick where you put your hands out in front of you, and the left one looks like the letter L?"

"Yeah."

"Well I'm illiterate now. I don't know what the letter L looks like."

When Cooper was far enough from the others, Julian approached him and spoke softly enough so that only Cooper could hear him. "Did you really get lost, or were you jerking it to Tim's sister?"

"Both," said Cooper.

"Did you at least wash your hands?"

"Does this place look like it has running water?"

"Just make sure you don't sit near —" A screech from outside the doorway leading out to the balcony drilled into Julian's head. It was like a thousand forks being scraped along the world's biggest chalkboard. Julian covered his long ears with his palms, but that provided little comfort. He turned to find the source of the noise.

A huge black bat, the size of a pteranodon, was hovering just beyond the balcony, flapping and screeching. When it had everyone's attention, it stopped screeching and ascended just high enough to reveal the freshly killed stag it held in its feet. It moved forward, dropped the dead deer on the balcony, and landed beside it. Standing upright, it wrapped itself in its leathery black wings and ducked its head down.

The membranes of the wings rapidly receded, leaving behind the long bony wing supports, which shrunk down into fingers. The legs and feet grew into human shape. The large pointed bat ears grew smaller and rounded at the top while the giant bat nostrils in the center of its face grew into a human nose. The whole process took less than six seconds, after which Millard, fully clothed, stood smiling at them.

Julian looked at his friends. They were all looking at each other, unsure of what the protocol for this was. Chaz started a polite golf clap, and everyone else followed suit. Millard gave a small bow, and then picked the carcass up off the floor as easily as if he was lifting a sack of tangerines.

"I apologize for the delay," he said. "Dinner will be in about

another thirty minutes.” He hefted the dead deer over one shoulder and walked into the kitchen. It was impossible for Julian to tell how he had killed the animal. Outside of being dead, it looked to be in pretty good shape. There were no smears of blood on its fur. The body wasn't broken or mangled in any way that he could see.

Dinner, not surprisingly, consisted of roasted deer. Chaz was right. It was delicious. But Julian might have found shoe leather delicious as hungry as he was.

Chaz ate as much as he could as quickly as he could before Millard called on him to perform. Everyone else started out greedily wolfing down as much venison as they could stuff into their faces, but soon slowed their pace as they transitioned from starving to reasonably hungry. Before everyone had eaten their fill, Chaz had sung *Holly Holy* six times, and *Sweet Caroline* twice.

Millard, naturally, did not eat. He merely sat back, enjoying the music and the company. Julian felt a little sorry for him.

Even Tim's spirits seemed a little lighter, suggesting that his sister's abduction was only partially responsible for his crankiness. Nobody likes an empty stomach.

Wine lightened the mood even further. Julian was no aficionado, but he knew that whatever they were drinking hadn't come out of a cardboard box. Millard was nothing if not a generous host. He even managed to scrounge up a bottle of hard stuff for Dave. By the fifth round of drinks, everyone had their arms draped over one another's shoulders, destroying *Sweet Caroline*. By the end of the night, they had talked Millard into letting Chaz have a go at some songs not by Neil Diamond. The playlist included songs by Elvis Presley, Billy Joel, The Beatles, and a few of Chaz's favorite bands that Julian hadn't heard of before.

Julian didn't remember how the night ended exactly. All he knew when he woke up the next morning was that he didn't feel well rested at all.

*

“Rise and shine, pumpkin!” said Cooper, slapping him on the back.

Julian's stomach turned, and he knew he had about five seconds before he was going to eject a night's worth of wine and venison from his mouth. He scanned the room frantically. There was only one option. He ran to an open window, stuck his head out, and let the previous night's dinner spray into the crisp morning air. That done, he hung his head. The thousand foot drop he saw between himself and the ground brought on one more heave, and he dribbled vomit down the side of the stone wall.

His clothes were filthy, and a little vomit wasn't going to make

much of a difference, so he wiped a sleeve across his face.

Julian turned around a little too quickly and had to lean against the wall to remain upright. Cooper and Dave looked as well as they ever did, packing their things and ready for whatever the day had in store. Tim looked pretty rough, but not half so much as Julian felt. Chaz and Katherine were not in the room with them.

"Feel better?" asked Dave.

"No," Julian groaned.

"You look like shit," said Cooper.

"And you smell like shit."

Cooper lowered his big head. "Yeah, well Dave healed me while I was sleeping. It's very relaxing. Mind you don't move that mat." He indicated a mat on the center of the floor. It was plain, whereas the rest of them had a blue and white striped pattern. Cooper's mat was obviously upside down, no doubt glued to the floor with drying shit.

"Let's just find Katherine and get out of here," said Tim.

"Do you even know where here is?" asked Dave. "I don't remember coming here. Do you?"

Tim shook his head. "I don't remember anything after the Macarena. Did you rem—"

The solitary door in the room swung open.

"Good morning!" Katherine stood grinning and Butterbean wagging his tail. A split second later they both recoiled. "Jesus Christ!" she said. "What's that smell?"

"It's Cooper," said Tim. "You get used to it. Since when are you so plucky in the morning?"

Katherine led the party out of the room and into the hall before answering. Cooper was the last to exit, and Katherine coughed and gestured for him to close the door behind him.

As soon as the air had cleared a bit, she smiled and said, "Since I became acquainted with Professor Goosewaddle's Magical Bath Salts."

"Is that a euphemism for cocaine?"

"Come on," Katherine said as if Tim hadn't even spoken. "You've got to see my room."

She led them to the other end of the hallway, which mirrored the side they had just come from. An identical wooden door stood before them. When she opened the door, however, the inside was anything but identical to the room they had slept in.

The dimensions were the same, but instead of shit-tainted air wafting out at them, they were engulfed in a cloud of sweet-smelling steam. There was also a trickling sound, like someone taking a long, continuous piss.

"Ooh, that's nice," said Dave.

The room was furnished with a plush bed, complete with a

translucent canopy. Vines crept up the bedposts and purple roses adorned the tops of them. A small dressing table stood next to the bed with a steamed-over mirror on top. Under the window sat the answers to the steam, the trickling sound, and the pumpkin that had led them here.

A hollowed-out pumpkin about the size of a small car had been painted over with lacquer until the surface shone like porcelain. Above it, a small metal pitcher rested on a hook, tipping forward, an endless stream of water trickling from it. Below the pitcher sat a small bowl containing one burning coal. The water spilling out of the top of the pumpkin was caught in an irrigation system which fed into the rose vines on the bed.

Katherine dipped her finger in the water. "It's always the perfect temperature."

"That's brilliant," said Dave. Tim glared up at him.

"I know, right? You should have seen how quickly Millard threw all of this together. He said in his former life, before he became a vampire, he was an engineer." Katherine picked up a clay jar, dunked it in the water, and poured the contents out the window. She repeated this two more times.

"What are you doing?" asked Tim.

"Making room for you," said Katherine. She picked up a glass of aquamarine crystals from her dressing table and sprinkled some of them into the bath. "And Professor Goosewaddle."

"No, Katherine," said Tim. "Really, I'm fine. Let's just –"

"Trust me, Tim. There's no hangover this can't fix."

Tim sighed. "Fine."

"Come downstairs and join us for breakfast when you're done."

Katherine closed the door behind her, leaving Tim alone in her room.

She led the others downstairs to the dining room, which was set up exactly as it had been when they'd arrived. There was no evidence at all that there had been a wild karaoke party the night before. Breakfast was boiled eggs and deer bacon. Chaz was already sitting at the table looking happy to be able to eat without having to perform.

The temperature indicated that the food had been prepared hours ago, but no one complained.

Twenty minutes into the meal, Tim bounded in on his squeaky clean halfling feet. He looked as happy and vibrant as Julian had ever seen him.

"You guys have got to try that!" he said.

Julian, Dave, and Cooper looked at one another.

"Hey Cooper," said Katherine apologetically. "Don't take this the wrong way, but would you mind not using my bath? I'm sorry, it's just that... well, you're disgusting."

If there was a right way to take that, Cooper met the challenge. He shrugged and shoved another couple of eggs into his mouth, chewed briefly, and spit out presumably a little more shell than he swallowed.

Julian and Dave eyed one another and, without a word being spoken between them, faced off in a game of Rock Paper Scissors. Dave's rock beat Julian's scissors. Dammit, of course it did. Why did he pick scissors? Nobody ever picks paper. Maybe it was just his imagination, but Julian thought there was something smug in the way Dave unbuckled his armor.

"I'm starting to see what you like about this place," Tim said to his sister. "In fact, it's a lot more comfortable here than it is at the Whore's Head Inn." He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the table. Even the soles were sparkly clean. "I could be talked into toughing it out here until we figure out a way to go home."

"As far as vampires go," said Julian. "Millard seems like a nice enough guy. He –"

"Uh-uh, guys," said Katherine. "Don't even think about it. He said he wants you out of here right after breakfast."

"What a cockbag," said Cooper through a mouthful of bacon. "Of course, I wouldn't want us around either if I was fucking your sister rotten all day."

"Shut up, Cooper!" Tim and Katherine shouted simultaneously.

Julian gave Cooper a disapproving glance across the table. Cooper just grinned back at him, his yellow teeth dotted with bacon bits.

"Well he's got a point, doesn't he?" said Tim.

"No," said Katherine. "He doesn't. I can promise you that you've got nothing to worry about between me and Millard." Her voice suggested a conspicuously absolute certainty.

"What are you saying?" asked Tim. "Is he gay?"

"No, he isn't gay." Katherine ran a hand through her hair. "I can't believe I'm telling you this. He's a vampire, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So think about it. He can't... you know..." The rest of the room was quiet. Katherine had a captive audience waiting for her to continue. She made a circle with the thumb and index finger of her left hand, and poked her right index finger in and out of it.

"He can't fuck?" asked Cooper.

"Thank you, Cooper," said Katherine. She put her hands down.

"What's that got to do with him being a vampire?" asked Cooper. "Vampires fuck all the time. Don't you have HBO?"

"He's dead," said Katherine. "He doesn't have any blood flow to his... his blood doesn't flow."

"Holy shit," said Cooper. "You're saying he can't get his pecker up?"

"Jesus," said Tim. "I never thought of that."

“What a raw deal,” said Julian. “You get to live forever, but you don’t get to have sex.”

“It’s like being Dave,” said Cooper.

“Listen,” said Katherine. “The point is that I’m totally safe here. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“He’s still a vampire,” said Tim. “I was less concerned with him boinking you and more concerned with him eating you.”

“He takes a little blood here and there, but he keeps me well fed and waits until I’m completely replenished.”

“Do you hear yourself?” asked Tim. “You don’t see how fucked up that is? If a guy back home wanted to drink your –”

“We’re not back home!” Katherine’s words sliced through Tim’s. There was anger and accusation in her voice. “We’re never going back home, so you’d better make whatever life you can for yourself here.”

“I’m working on getting us back home,” said Tim.

“Yeah, well good luck with that.” Her voice trembled and her eyes began to glisten. “I’m going to take a bath,” she said, running up the stairs. “When I get out, I want you all gone!”

“Hey!” came the sound of Dave’s voice as Katherine stormed into her room. “What the –”

He stumbled out, naked and dripping wet, onto the top of the stairs, holding his helmet over his junk. Piece by piece, the rest of his armor was thrown at him, followed by his mace and his bag.

The whole house shook as Katherine slammed the door.

“Dude,” said Dave. “What’s up with your sister?”

“She’s having some mixed emotions right now,” said Tim.

“I think she’s homesick,” said Julian.

“Sexual frustration,” offered Cooper.

Tim picked up his pack. “We’d better go.”

“We’re just going to leave your sister here?” asked Cooper.

“I think that’s the best option for now,” said Tim. “I mean yeah, he’s a vampire, but he seems all right. It’s probably safer for her in here than it is out there in the city. We’ll come back for her when we figure out a way home.”

Dave shook himself dry as best he could and proceeded to strap his armor back on. Julian and Ravenus ate a few more pieces of bacon. Cooper dumped the uneaten eggs into his pack. Chaz strapped his lute to his back and picked up his bag.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” asked Tim.

“She can stay if she wants,” said Chaz. “But I want to get out of here.”

“You’re going to stay here and look after my sister.”

“But the torture!” Chaz whined.

“I don’t give a shit if he makes you sing *Achy Breaky Heart* from

now until Christmas,” said Tim. “I’m not leaving my sister alone with a vampire who is pissed off about losing his favorite bard.”

Tim knelt in front of Butterbean and rubbed his neck. The wolf whined and pouted, but seemed to understand that he had to leave.

Once outside, they met the same two men who had been standing guard at the door the night before. Did they not sleep? One of them shoved the weapons-collection crate at Julian with his foot.

As they collected their belongings, a corpse of a horse pulled a carriage before them. The beast was a gruesome sight. Hairless, decomposing skin was literally falling off of its bare-bone legs. So much skin had receded from its mouth and eyelids that it looked as though its face was frozen in some maniacal horse grin.

“This must be our ride,” said Dave.

“It would seem so,” said Tim. Neither of them looked to be in any great hurry to hop on board.

Julian was ready to get off of this mountain, zombie horse or no zombie horse. He hopped up in the carriage. The seats were made of soft, black leather. Windows surrounded the sides and rear of the cabin, but were conspicuously absent from the front, which seemed counterintuitive until Julian figured out that the purpose for such a design was that you wouldn’t have to look at the ass of a dead horse. This, in turn, meant that Millard must have designed and built this carriage himself. Impressive.

Cooper was the next in, followed reluctantly by Dave, Tim, and Butterbean. Ravenus perched on top. As soon as the last of them was seated, the carriage jerked forward. Tim stared back at the fort until it disappeared from view.

The zombie horse proved to be surprisingly good at its job, and they made it down the mountain in about a quarter of the time it had taken them to climb up it. Once they were safely within sight of Cardinia’s city walls, the carriage stopped. When the last of them climbed out, the horse turned around and trotted back the way it had come from.

Chapter 15

Tim found Frank at his usual table, sipping a beer and laughing about something the dwarf sitting across from him had said. He stepped up behind him and cleared his throat loudly.

Frank turned around. "Tim!" he said. "Welcome back!" His cheeks were a bit rosier than usual

"Has Stuart cooled down yet?"

Frank puffed out his cheeks and let out a long, exasperated sigh. "I expect he's cooled down as much as he's going to. You'd best keep Cooper away from him for a while though."

"That's fine," said Tim. "We need to talk."

"What's on your mind, sport?"

"Not here."

Frank turned to his comrades at the table. "Fellas, I'll be right back."

Tim took Frank by the arm and Frank allowed himself to be taken. They rushed through a forest of crotches and asses to a dark and unoccupied corner of the bar.

"We're going to need a stake," said Tim below the murmur.

"Is that all?" asked Frank. "Why all this cloak-and-dagger bullshit? I'll have the cook fix something up. How'd things go with your sister?"

"Not that kind of steak," said Tim. "We'll be hunting a vampire. I need a wooden stake."

The color vanished from Frank's cheeks. "That's pretty fucking ambitious for a group of second level scrubs, don't you think?"

"He's got my sister in there with him, under some kind of charm or glamour or whatever."

"I feel for your plight, man. I really do, but I just can't risk any of my guys for –"

"I'm not asking you to risk anyone's life," said Tim. "I'm just trying to get my hands on a stake."

"It's just a wooden pointy stick," said Frank. "You could sharpen a chair leg. What do you need me for?"

"I'm going to need something a little more advanced than a sharpened chair leg."

"Look, kid. I don't think we have any spellcasters here who can permanently magically enhance a weapon. And if we did, we sure as shit wouldn't be using it on wooden stakes."

"I don't need it magically enhanced. We'd never get it past the guards with a magical aura. But as I'd like to have every edge I can get, I would like a stake of masterwork quality. We'll probably only get one shot at this bastard's heart."

“More like no shots,” said Frank. “This is a suicide mission. Vampires don’t fuck around. Your shitty little Move Silently bonus isn’t going to help you sneak up on a vampire. He’s going to rip you apart before you even know he’s there.”

“No he won’t,” said Tim. “He likes us.”

“He *likes* you?”

“Where do you think we’ve been all night. He cooked dinner for us in his fort.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” said Tim. “The guy is lonely. He just wants some company.”

“And you’re going to exploit his emotional insecurity to murder him.”

“Absolutely.”

Frank shook his head. “I can get you a stake. Fritz has a few ranks in woodworking. I’m sure he can sort something out. But let me make this plain. You guys are on your own. I’m not sending anyone else to die for your sister.”

“I understand,” said Tim. “There’s one more specification I’d like to request.”

“What more do you want out of a stake? It’s a sharpened stick. What, do you need an ivory handle? A mother-of-pearl inlaid carrying case?”

“I mentioned guards before.”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” said Tim. “They pat us down pretty good, and take all of our weapons before we go in. We’re going to have to smuggle in the stake.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” asked Frank. The grimace on his face suggested he already had a pretty good idea of what the answer was going to be.

“We’ve got to shove it up Cooper’s ass.”

Frank sighed. “Of course you do.”

“I appreciate this,” said Tim. “If you wouldn’t mind, could you keep this just between us? And Fritz, I guess.”

“Too fucking right I will,” Frank snapped. “You think I want any of these idiots getting it in their head that they’re going to go kill a vampire?”

“Thanks, Frank. How long do you think it will take?”

“You’re making a pretty big request of someone who is under-qualified to do it. My guess is that it will take a few weeks.”

“Weeks?” said Tim. “What if she doesn’t have weeks? It’s a fucking stick! You said as much yourself.”

“A Masterwork Weapon is a piece of art,” said Frank. “If Fritz fucks it up – and I’ll tell you right now, he’s going to fuck it up a good many

times before he gets it right – you won't get any attack bonus. If you don't want to wait, I understand. But let me know now so we don't waste Fritz's time."

"No," said Tim. "It's okay. I'll wait."

*

The next few weeks were some of the longest weeks in Tim's life, aside from high school. Frank gave up on trying to force Cooper and Stuart to get along by sending them out on missions together. He allowed Tim, Cooper, Dave, and Julian to work together as long as they managed to keep producing an income, and he even went as far as letting them have a day off once a week to go visit Katherine.

Stepping out of the Whore's Head Inn was always like stepping into hostile territory. They learned pretty quickly how to best avoid running into the Horsemen, and they even became friendly with a pair of guards at one of the city gates who would always laugh and shake their heads whenever the group returned, broken and battered with little or nothing to show for it, from one of their daily outings.

"Been out treasure hunting again, have you?" they would say. "It's a dangerous world out beyond these walls. You boys should really stay inside."

Of course they were right. Whatever precautions they took to minimize their risk of dying, they always seemed to find more trouble than treasure. The only reason Frank let them continue as they did was that occasionally they would land a big score. Big for them anyway. A magic ring, or a fancy dagger or something they could pawn for some decent cash.

Visits to Millard's Fort were surprisingly pleasant. The vampire's carriage was always there waiting for them early on Friday evenings, which was the time they'd agreed upon for these visits. Millard would always make a big show of leaping out the window to suck the life out of some poor wild animal and cook it for his guests. Katherine's clothing went from whorish to 1950's housewife-ish as she grew to be quite a little homemaker. It was kind of unsettling at first, but she seemed happy and healthy enough. She always loosened up the act when she got a little wine in her, so Tim knew that the real Katherine was somewhere in there.

The only one who seemed any worse for the wear was Chaz. With each visit, he looked more browbeaten and haggard than before. Every chance he got, usually when Millard was otherwise occupied, he'd beg Tim to get him out of there. All Tim could do was to tell him he was working on it.

Other than that, Millard's Fort was a good place to unwind after a week of continuously almost dying. Tim found that the sooner he

started drinking, the more he could enjoy his host's hospitality without all the qualms and anxiety that came with doing so while secretly planning to murder him.

*

One morning, Tim woke up with the sense that something was amiss in the Whore's Head Inn. Maybe it was too quiet. Maybe it wasn't quiet enough. More than the normal number of people seemed to be looking at Tim. And to make it more unnerving, whenever he looked back they turned their heads and pretended they hadn't been looking. A quick glance around showed him that the same was true for Dave, Julian, and Cooper – especially Cooper – and that none of them seemed to be aware of it yet.

There was a buzz in the air, a certain electricity. Tim thought he would have been able to recognize it if it had been hostility. This felt different. He couldn't put his finger on it.

"Gentlemen," said Frank, emerging from the kitchen and clapping his hands together. The unusual quiet turned to absolute silence and no one bothered pretending to not be looking at the four of them.

"What's going on?" asked Tim.

Frank lowered his head. "They know."

"What?" said Tim. "How could they know? You said it was as important to you as it was to us that this be kept a secret!"

Frank shrugged. "Word leaked."

"Who leaked it?"

"Don't look at me," Frank said, putting up his hands in a gesture of innocence.

"Well if it wasn't you, and it wasn't me," Tim snapped his head around to glare at his three friends. Dave and Julian shook their heads immediately. Cooper was busy rubbing his back against a post.

"Dammit, Cooper!" said Tim.

"Wha?"

"Who did you tell about Millard?"

"I didn't say shit."

"Don't you lie to me, Cooper!" Tim stomped up to Cooper, fist cocked and ready to punch him in the dick. "Spill it!"

"Honestly," said Cooper. "I didn't say anything to anyone!"

Tim stared furiously up into Cooper's eyes. Cooper's stare back down at him didn't waver in the slightest. Tim believed he was telling the truth.

"Shit," he said. He turned back to Frank. "If it wasn't any of us, and it wasn't you, then who could ha—" He scanned the room. "Where is that little shit?"

"Who?" asked Frank.

“Fritz!”

Fritz slowly came out from behind the beam where he’d been hiding. “I’m sorry, Tim,” he said. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“Not your fault?” shouted Tim. “You only had two things to do, and the easiest of those was to keep your goddamn mouth shut!”

Fritz wasted no time in passing the blame. He pointed at Gorgonzola. “He saw you sneaking around with Frank, whispering in the shadows, and wanted to know what was going on. He Gather Informationed me!”

Tim paused for a moment, more confused than angry. “He did what?”

“He’s got six ranks! I’ve only got a seven for Wisdom. I take a penalty on Will Saves!”

Tim turned to Gorgonzola. “And who did you tell?”

“I told Stuart.” Gorgonzola’s voice was not in the least bit apologetic.

“Why?” Tim demanded.

Gorgonzola shrugged. “I like Stuart. I thought it was an interesting piece of information to share.”

Tim found it difficult to focus his anger on Gorgonzola. He scanned the crowd until he came to Stuart. If Gorgonzola had looked unapologetic, Stuart looked positively antagonistic. He wore a grin that split his bald head in half.

“Okay, Stuart,” said Tim. “Who did you tell?”

“I told everyone.”

“Why would you do that?” pleaded Tim.

Stuart glanced at Cooper. “I didn’t want anyone to miss this.”

“Miss what?” Tim’s voice betrayed a combination of fear and anger.

“Fritz?”

Tim looked at Fritz, who was still cowering back in the shadows. His face and demeanor still reeked of fear and apology, despite him being the only one with a reasonable excuse for having talked about the secret mission.

“Jesus, dude,” said Tim. “You’re forgiven, all right? What’s up?”

Fritz lowered his head. He reached into his cloak and produced a polished cherry box, which he lay on the table in front of him. “Here’s your stake,” he said meekly.

Tim raised his eyebrows. “Fancy box. You really didn’t have to go to all that trouble.”

“It comes with the Masterwork Weapon package,” he said. He let out a small squeak and covered his face with his hands.

“Dude,” said Tim. “Really, it’s okay.”

More squeaks escaped the throats of several others in the crowd. Tim looked around. Mouths were covered. Eyes began to water. But

nobody was crying. They were trying desperately to contain laughter.

“What the hell is going on?” Tim asked Frank.

Even Frank was biting his knuckles. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Open the box.”

Tim approached the box cautiously, attempting to use his Detect Traps skill on it. He couldn’t detect any such thing, but he unlatched the box as if spring-loaded sharks were going to pop out of it. He lifted the lid slowly until he had a clear view of what was inside. When he had determined the contents were safe, he opened it all the way.

The inside of the box was lined with red silk. Tim nodded in approval. If the weapon was as skillfully crafted as the packaging, he would certainly get his plus one bonus To Hit.

A white silk handkerchief covered the weapon itself. Tim lifted one end to reveal a polished wooden point as sharp as any needle. He pulled back the handkerchief. The point gave way to a polished black shaft, decorated with blue ridges meandering out in haphazard directions, like roads on a rural map. Or was it more like... *NO!*

Tim slammed the lid down on the box and turned around to face Cooper. Laughter erupted so deep and loud that he felt like he could swim in it.

“Cooper,” Tim whispered to himself.

Cooper walked toward Tim. People who had control of themselves got out of his way. Those too overcome by laughter to move, he shoved to one side. It didn’t seem to bother him. “What’s in the box, Tim?”

“Cooper,” pleaded Tim. “I’m sorry, but I need your help.”

The laughter had calmed down to the point that their conversation was audible.

“You know I’ll do anything for you,” said Cooper.

The laughter cranked up to a higher level than before.

“Remember,” said Tim. “It’s for Katherine.”

“What’s in the box, Tim?”

The laughter subsided once more as people shushed each other until the room fell silent.

“Come on, Tim,” said Stuart. “Open the box.”

Tim looked around, hating everyone and everything he saw. He tried to hold back his preemptive hate for Cooper, but it was at the forefront of his mind, ready to be deployed. He lowered his head, opened the box, and removed the handkerchief.

Between Tim and Cooper lay six inches of wooden, heart-piercing vampire death which flowed into two feet of black, veiny, mushroom-headed cock. It was a giant dildo.

“I’m sorry, Tim,” said Cooper. “I’m not putting that in my ass.”

“Cooper,” Tim pleaded. “You’re the only chance we’ve got. Yours is

the biggest asshole here.”

“Want me to lube it up for you?” said Stuart. The remark earned him a few chuckles, but the mood of the crowd seemed to have turned nervous, as if they thought maybe the joke had gone too far.

“Second biggest,” Tim corrected himself. That got a warmer reception from the crowd, but the nervous tension still hung in the air.

Cooper grinned. “There’s no way I’m shoving a giant cock up my ass. Let’s have some drinks and we’ll think of another way.”

“There is no other way!” said Tim. “We’ll never get –”

“We don’t need another way,” said Dave. The attention of the room shifted his way. He coughed. “It’s not like we’re under any time pressure, right? Why not just get Fritz to make another stake that isn’t shaped like a dick, or else we’ll club him to death with this one?”

Tim and Cooper looked at one another, then over at Fritz.

“I’ll get to work on it right away,” said Fritz, looking relieved to have found a way to redeem himself.

Tim nodded his head slowly. “I can live with that. Cooper, I’ll take you up on that drink.”

The crowd’s tension broke. People went back about their business of eating, drinking, and talking.

Frank brought a bottle and five shot glasses to their table. “I’m real sorry, fellas. We were all pretty drunk when Stuart brought up that dildo idea, and it seemed really funny at the time. Honestly, it still seemed funny once I sobered up, right up until you reminded us that your sister was being held captive.” He poured five shots. “Just don’t take it out on Fritz. He’s a good kid, and it wasn’t his idea.”

“Yeah, all right,” said Tim. “What’s that?”

“Stonepiss,” said Dave. “It’s like if tequila was made out of fermented rocks.”

“That gives me absolutely no sensual image at all,” said Julian.

“Just try it,” said Dave. “You’ll love it.”

Cooper held up his glass. “To one day me beating the shit out of Stuart with a giant wooden dick.”

Everyone shrugged and nodded their approval. “Cheers!”

Dave’s description of the drink turned out to be surprisingly apt. It was like drinking gravel. It burned going down, but the buzz was immediate, and it was better than goblin piss. Tim poured himself another shot.

After three shots, Tim’s mood started to lighten. Cooper and Dave had upgraded to drinking the stonepiss out of beer mugs. Julian downgraded to watered down beer after deciding that his initial shot of stonepiss didn’t agree with him.

Frank threw out a couple of ideas for a more strategic approach for storming a vampire fort, but they were all shot down for one reason or

another, and eventually the conversation wandered toward speculation on what kind of treasure a vampire might be hoarding.

Tim had a sixth shot of stonepiss and found himself unable to focus on anything. The Whore's Head Inn swirled around him. Conversation was nothing more than a blurry din. He grabbed the side of the table with both hands and forced himself to focus on something, anything. His tired eyes honed in on one of the four or five empty stonepiss bottles until he was able to take a final mental snapshot. The following darkness that flowed in was briefly interrupted by a thump on his forehead, and then nothing.

Chapter 16

Chaz struggled to fight off a yawn as he performed *Forever in Blue Jeans* for the fourteenth time in a row. It was still a relief after twenty-seven rounds of *Sweet Caroline*, but he was starting to wish the old dead bastard would switch him over to *Holly Holy* again, just for a change.

Millard stood over Katherine as she sat at the dining room table, devouring a plate of roasted boar ribs. He was decked out like Hugh Hefner in a red silk robe, and she looked ready for a night out at the governor's ball in a low-cut black evening dress. Her mouth was covered in Millard's homemade barbeque sauce which was, admittedly, pretty good, and he gazed down longingly at her as if she were making out with her twin sister. It was hard to tell whether Millard's arousal was brought on by Katherine looking sexy, which she did, or by the fact that she was enjoying real food, a pleasure which had been denied him for quite some time.

"These ribs are fucking delicious," said Katherine. Her face froze suddenly, and she looked up at him. "Oh I'm sorry. Please excuse my language."

"You needn't ever apologize for anything, my love," said Millard, running a cold, dead finger through her vibrant blonde hair. Chaz had felt those fingers around his neck more than once after the occasional slip of the tongue.

Katherine stood up, looked Millard in the eyes, and wrapped her bare arms around his neck. She pulled him close to her, until her breasts were pressed up against his chest. "I've offended you, my lord. I must be punished." She licked the barbeque sauce off of her lips.

Chaz didn't miss a note, but lowered his lute to obscure the erection that was starting to brew. Katherine and Chaz had been out on three dates, and she'd never come on to him as strongly as she was coming on to this old dead fucker.

"Save your strength, love," said Millard, resting his hands on her hips. "I fed on you only yesterday."

"I know," said Katherine, almost purring as she spoke. "I haven't stopped thinking about it." She whipped her head around, moving her hair to one side and exposing her long, naked neck. Chaz had never been one to notice a woman's arteries, but he took notice of Katherine's carotid artery now. To Millard, it must look like the biggest pair of titties in the world.

"You don't know what you're asking, love," said Millard. He licked his lips. "It's too soon." His tone suggested that he was giving less and less of a fuck with each passing second.

“Don’t be shy, Millard,” said Katherine, stepping up on her tiptoes, thrusting her neck even closer to Millard’s face. “I just ate two plates of ribs. My body is producing so much blood right now I just might burst.”

Millard’s eyes were wide and focused on Katherine’s neck. “Well I suppose just a nibble couldn’t hurt.” He lowered his head and opened his mouth, exposing his elongated fangs. One fang touched her skin, producing a small red bead. He licked it off with the tip of his tongue and she swooned. One of her hands moved up to the back of his head, and the other crept down his back.

“Take me, Millard,” said Katherine.

Millard pressed his open mouth against Katherine’s neck, and she let out a small yelp. He drank greedily, but some of the blood still spilled out of his mouth and down Katherine’s neck.

Katherine moaned with pain and pleasure. With her right hand, she brought Millard’s left hand to her breast. He held it there as if he were unsure what to do with it. It had obviously been a while since he’d bothered with second base.

As horrifying a spectacle as it was to witness, Chaz kept on singing and strumming. It was nothing he hadn’t witnessed a dozen or more times already.

“Harder, Millard, harder!” Katherine cried. Chaz guessed it had been a few decades since the old boy had had a woman tell him that. At least he’d have a good wank before he went to sleep today. If he ever made it back home, he feared he would have to up the depravity-level of his internet porn searches. But if that’s the worst problem that he came out of this with, then... *Hold on, this was going on longer than it should. Katherine was starting to look pale.*

Chaz stopped strumming. “Hey guys. Maybe you should –”

Millard glared at him, the bottom half of his face completely slathered in Katherine’s blood. “Play the fucking song!”

Chaz immediately started strumming again, and Millard sucked gently on Katherine’s neck.

Katherine grabbed hold of Millard’s hair and shoved his head deeper into her neck. “Stop fucking around and take me!”

Millard did as he was told. He sucked harder on Katherine’s neck and squeezed her tit so hard that his fingernails ripped through the fabric of her dress and pierced her skin. Katherine let out an ecstatic scream, which was cut short by the sound of teeth crunching through cartilage. Her head drooped back and her body went limp.

“NOOOO!” Chaz shouted.

Millard looked up at Chaz. His face a mask of blood-smeared shame this time, rather than anger. He looked like a belligerent drunk who had finally pissed his pants. “Play the song five more times,” he said.

“Then you may retire for the day.”

With shaky hands and numb fingers, Chaz began to strum the strings of his lute. Millard carried Katherine’s limp, lifeless body down the hall and across the threshold of his coffin room.

The following five performances of *Forever in Blue Jeans* were not the best of Chaz’s career. When he finished playing, he huddled in a corner and shivered. He did not sleep that day.

Chapter 17

Dave's dreams flickered like a TV screen during a storm. He shrugged it off the first two times and kept right on dreaming. He was in a car, being chased by some mob guys, pinstripe-suited arms waving Tommy guns out of the windows. Dave's car and the car in pursuit were crossing a bridge. Come to think of it, they had been crossing this bridge for quite some time, all the while creeping closer and closer to driving right off the side of it. He knew he should turn the wheel and straighten out in the lane, but he just kept creeping closer and closer to that edge.

Jolt. Static.

Back on the bridge. Still driving. The mob guys were right on his tail.

Jolt. Static.

What was that? Didn't matter. Focus on the road. You're getting kinda close to that edge. Be careful.

Jolt. Smack!

Dave was back in the Whore's Head Inn. The side of his face burned. He knew that burn. He'd been slapped. "What!"

"Come on, man," said Julian. "Wake up!" His voice was off somehow.

"What is it? What's wrong?" He quickly looked around the room. They were all still at the table they had been drinking at. Light from the elf table's solitary candle glinted off two dozen empty bottles. It had been a hell of a night. Tim lay sound asleep with his head resting on his arms. Cooper had fallen off of his stool and lay face down on the floor in a puddle of vomit. Nothing seemed to be amiss.

Firm hands with slender fingers grabbed either side of his beard and forced his head forward.

"Dave!" said Julian. His eyes were watery and his cheeks tear-tracked.

"What's wrong?" asked Dave.

"We're too late," said Julian. He let go of Dave's face and sat down heavily on a stool.

"What are you talking about?"

Julian pointed back to the corner table where the insomniac elves kept watch. "Katherine is dead."

Not a single elf met Dave's gaze as he stumbled after Julian toward their table, hoping he was still in some stonepiss-induced nightmare. Katherine's character sheet was spread out flat on the table.

"We're sorry for your loss," said Fritz.

"Shit," said Dave, blinking his eyes hard, still trying to force himself

awake from the dream he desperately hoped he was in. It didn't work. "All right, so her Hit Points are at zero. That doesn't necessarily mean she's –"

"Look at her Constitution score," said Tony the Elf. He didn't seem to want to touch the paper, and it took a while for Dave's bleary, anxious eyes to center on the right location.

Constitution: 0 (Dead)

"No arguing with that," he said under his breath. He looked up at Julian. "What are we going to do?"

"We've got to tell Tim."

"This is going to break him," said Dave. Ever since he'd known Tim, he'd always been right on the edge of a nervous breakdown. His whole life he'd always been so goddamn serious. Never taking a break. Always taking on more responsibility than he could handle. Dave was actually going to quit the game a while back on account of Cooper being such an obnoxious asshole, but he didn't want to let Tim down. Without that Friday night pressure release, Dave thought Tim would have cracked up a long time ago. All he had in life were his few shitty friends and his sister. This was going to kill him.

"Dude, we can't keep this from him."

"Yeah," said Dave. "I know." He wiped some sweat off his forehead. "Listen, I'd better be the one to tell him. You mind taking a walk?"

"Yeah," said Julian. "Of course." He backed away

Dave looked down at Tim. This was going to be hard. Tim was sleeping so peacefully. It didn't help that he looked like a little boy who was tuckered out after a long summer day of running through the forest, building a treehouse or whatever. This was the last moment of peace Tim would ever know.

"Tim," Dave whispered, patting him gently on the back. "Tim, wake up."

Tim's eyes opened wearily, went wide for a moment, and closed again. "Hey Dave. Hell of a party last night. How are you feeling?"

Dave lowered his head. "A little rough, I guess. Not too bad. I'm a dwarf, right? I don't really suffer from hangovers."

"I feel like shit," said Tim. "I'm glad I passed out when I did." He looked at the mess on the table. "Jesus, you guys didn't fuck around, did you?"

"Yeah," said Dave. "Well, you know Cooper. Moderation isn't exactly his strong suit."

Tim looked down at Cooper, sprawled out, face-down on the floor. "Quite the understatement."

"Listen," said Dave. "Something's come up." Katherine's rolled up character sheet weighed heavy in his hand.

Tim looked at Dave. "What's up?"

“I’m really sorry, man.”

“Spit it the fuck out, Dave.”

Hot tears welled up in Dave’s eyes, and burned down each side of his face. “The son of a bitch killed her.”

“Drop the fucking pronouns, man,” said Tim. His voice shook. “What happened?”

Dave couldn’t speak. He held paper out to Tim.

Tim snatched it out of his hand and spread it flat on the table. He stared at the paper silently while his face made the transition from porcelain white to tomato red. He grabbed the nearest stonepiss bottle – still about a quarter full – and hurled it against a wall. It shattered in an explosion of glass and hard liquor. He looked around for something else to take out his aggression on, and found it lying on the floor next to him.

“Wake up, Cooper!” he shouted, kicking Cooper in the ass.

“Five more minutes,” Cooper groaned without opening his eyes.

“Wake the fuck up, you lazy sack of shit!” Tim brought his foot back, his eyes focused on Cooper’s ribs.

Dave winced as he saw it play out in what seemed like slow-motion. Footballs had been sent through goal posts from fifty yards away with less force. The crack was nearly as loud as the shattering bottle had been.

“Fuck!” shouted Cooper, now fully awake. He sat up, rubbing the spot over his broken rib. “I’m up! Where’s the fucking fire?”

Tim lunged at Cooper as he got to his feet. Had they both been normal, full-grown adults, they would have both tumbled around on the floor. With their current difference in mass, Tim might as well have been trying to tackle an elephant. He clung on to Cooper’s shoulders.

Cooper grabbed Tim by the back of his shirt, and peeled him off like a wet paper towel. Tim flailed his arms, trying in vain to get in a punch as Cooper held him out at arm’s length. “What’s gotten into you, dude?”

Tim frantically punched and clawed at the air half a foot away from Cooper’s face. “My sister’s dead, you stupid son of a bitch!”

“Oh, Tim!” said Cooper, embracing Tim like a bear hugging a bunny. Tim’s arms and legs squirmed about as he tried to pry his face away from Cooper’s filthy chest.

“What’s all the noise about?” asked Frank, rubbing his eyes as he stumbled out from behind the bar.

“We’re too late,” said Cooper through a throat full of phlegm. The big bastard was actually crying. “Katherine’s dead.” He squeezed Tim tighter.

“Jesus, dude,” said Frank. “I’m really sorry.”

“You’re sorry!” shouted Cooper. “A lot of good that does us!”

“Calm down, big guy,” said Frank. “This isn’t over yet.”

Cooper sucked in a great wet inhalation of snot. “Isn’t over? She’s fucking dead, man! How much more over can it get? She’s gone! Dead, with a capital... um...”

“D,” said Dave.

“D!” said Cooper.

“This is C&C,” said Frank. “You can get her back. There’s a temple to Rapha right up the road from here.”

Tim continued to punch Cooper’s chest. He finally got his attention with a kick in the crotch. Cooper dropped Tim to cradle his balls.

Tim fell to the floor gasping for air. “Frank’s right,” he said. “We can go get her back!”

“I’m coming with you,” said a voice from a dark corner of the bar. Stuart stepped out into the dim moonlight coming in through the window.

“Hold on a tick,” said Frank. “We had a deal, remember? None of my guys are supposed to get involved in this.”

“Your deal,” shouted Dave, “went out the window when you held your little dildo party last night!”

“I can decide for myself, Frank,” said Stuart. “This is my fault. I’m sorry about the dildo. That was a shitty thing to do. If you have to go in unarmed, it might behoove you to have a monk on your side.”

“Um,” said Julian. “We’ve still got one problem.”

“No,” said Cooper. He wiped a tear out of his eye. It was impossible to tell if it had originated from the news of Katherine’s passing or from being kicked in the nuts. “Fetch the dildo.”

Chapter 18

Even from a distance, the temple of Rapha stood out against the night like a reflection of the moon. Flaming brass braziers illuminated gleaming white marble pillars, and it made Cooper's head hurt.

As if the discomfort of walking around with a giant wooden cock up his ass wasn't enough, Cooper was suffering from the worst hangover he'd ever had. That stonepiss didn't fuck around. He desperately needed to rehydrate, and was even prepared to suck up a puddle off the street if they happened by one. No such luck.

"May the light of Rapha shine on you," said a man in white robes as the party approached the front steps. "What does such a varied group of travelers seek at such an early hour?"

The temple had few walls and no doors. It must be a twenty-four hour establishment.

"We seek healing," said Julian.

"Who among you is afflicted?" asked the man at the top of the stairs.

"My sister," said Tim.

The man scanned the group one more time. "I take it she is not here among you."

"No," said Tim. "This will have to be a house call."

"And what, may I ask, is her affliction?"

"She's dead."

The man frowned. "Death comes to us all, child. There is naught but —"

"Cut the bullshit," said Tim. "I'm not a child."

"We are all Rapha's children."

"I don't have time for this. Can you bring my sister back to life or not?"

"Alas," said the man. "I cannot. I am not so strong in the faith such that Rapha has seen fit to grant me such power over death. There is but one of our number whom Rapha has given such power. Brother Tristan, and he is currently away."

"When will he be back?" asked Stuart.

"It is not for me to say. But perhaps I can spare you further grief by telling you honestly that such a favor from the temple is not handed out to just anyone. I humbly beg forgiveness for the observation, but you appear to be men of humble means, and the favor you seek would require rather a sizeable donation to the temple."

"We can get money," said Tim.

"That's right!" said Julian. "We're actually on our way to go take out the vampire who killed his sister. He's probably loaded. In fact, if

a couple of you guys wanted to help out –”

The priest smiled sadly. “We are not assassins for hire.”

“But –”

The priest stopped Julian with a finger. “I would encourage you not to seek revenge. You will most likely die. And even should you succeed, it will not bring this young man’s sister back. It will only further darken your hearts.”

“This is bullshit,” said Cooper. His heart was pounding in his head, and the last thing he needed was a fucking sermon.

A grimace flickered over the priest’s face at Cooper, but it soon turned back to stoic kindness. “However,” he said. “If you are certain you want to continue down this road, allow me to bless you in the holy font of Rapha. Follow, but remain quiet.” He turned and walked up the stairs.

Tim whispered to Dave. “What do you think?”

“About what?” asked Dave.

“Is it worth our time getting blessed, or should we just bail?”

“Whether it’s worth it or not,” said Julian, “we should take him up on his hospitality. It would be rude not to, and we might need these guys later.”

“Your call, Tim,” said Cooper.

“Fine,” said Tim. “Let’s hurry it up though.”

Tim, Julian, Cooper, Dave, Butterbean, and Stuart scampered up the marble stairs with Ravenus flying overhead.

The inside of the temple was beautiful. Firelight danced on the polished marble pillars and shone on the reflective floor. At the center of it all stood a twenty foot tall stone statue of what Cooper assumed to be Rapha. The figure was armored and armed with a great hammer, but his weapon was tucked away and his face showed compassion as he laid his hand on the head of some disheveled beggar. At the base of the statue – at Rapha’s feet and the beggar’s knees – stone cherubs held pitchers which poured continuous streams of water into a stone pool. *Water!*

Cooper pushed Dave and Stuart to either side of him and ran toward the fountain.

“What is he...” he barely heard the priest say before he was able to stick his head in. It was cool and refreshing. He took in gulp after gulp, and his headache immediately started to evaporate. The coolness coursed down his parched throat, into his queasy stomach, and filled his whole being with vigor. He could feel the pointy end of the stake poking out of his ass, and hoped that it wasn’t making a conspicuous lump in the back of his loincloth. He was ugly enough without people thinking he had a tail. He drank until he couldn’t breathe. Then he lifted his head out of the water and took in a lungful of air.

Someone might have been yelling at him, but he wasn't going to stay and find out. It was time for round two, so back under he went. Swallow after swallow, he gulped down the sweet sweet hydration until he had had his fill.

When Cooper's thirst was sated, he removed his head from the fountain again.

"You barbarous brute!" The priest was doing all he could to keep his shouting to a whisper. "Look what you've done! You've defiled the holy water of Rapha!"

Cooper looked into the fountain. The water level was down to about a quarter of what it had been, and noticeably browner. "Um... sorry." The belch which followed shook the air, causing the hanging brass braziers to quiver and cast strange shadows about the temple. That felt good.

"We're very sorry." Julian made a desperate attempt at a Diplomacy check. "He's just –"

"Get out, all of you!" said the priest. The façade of kindness was gone from his face. "If I ever see any of your miserable faces again, I'll have you arrested and hanged!"

"Come on, guys," said Tim. "Let's go."

"And may your sister burn in the fiery abyss!"

"Why you little..." Tim ran at the priest. Cooper quickly stepped between them and held Tim back with one hand. With the other hand, he punched the priest square in the face, knocking him out cold.

The rest of the group looked up at him in stunned silence.

"What?"

"Dude," said Dave. "You just punched a priest in the face."

"He had it coming."

"We seriously have to get out of here," said Julian.

The group booked it down the stairs back into the cover of early morning darkness.

Chapter 19

"I wish he didn't live on top of a mountain," Julian complained to anyone who was listening. His thighs burned with each forced step. "It'd be faster if I conjured up some horses."

"Save your spells," Tim said without turning around. "We don't want to get there fast." The pace he was keeping suggested otherwise. If he felt any burning in his little thighs, he wasn't bothered about it. "We want to strike during the day. Catch that bastard by surprise when he's at his weakest."

Tim's estimate of how long it would take to reach the fort turned out to be wrong. Though they were uninterrupted by dire badgers, giant squirrels, or whatever other ridiculous creatures which might inhabit the mountain, Dave simply couldn't keep the pace.

It wasn't his fault. He just wasn't built for speed. Huffing and puffing as he marched in his armor, he reminded Julian of a World War I tank. He wasn't something you'd necessarily want to face in combat, but at the same time he looked as though he could fall apart at any moment.

When they finally reached the summit, Julian leaned back against the rock wall. He peeked his head over the top to check for zombies. A few of them were stumbling around, but they were pretty far off, and shouldn't be too much bother. Beyond them, Julian saw the sun, almost touching the horizon. "We're too late."

"Like hell we are!" said Tim. "It's still light out. We can make it if we go now!"

"No," panted Dave. "Don't forget. We still have to get past those two gorillas at the front door."

Cooper grabbed Tim by the arm.

"The hell with them," said Tim, making a show of trying to get free. "I'll kill them too."

"This was not the plan," said Stuart.

"Fuck the plan!"

"Stuart's right," said Dave. "Millard's our target. Any effort we waste on those two is going to make our chances of taking down a vampire even worse than it is already."

"But –"

"Listen," Dave insisted. "He doesn't even know that we know about Katherine. He may just let us inside without a struggle. You know, tell us some bullshit about how she's not feeling well or something, and would we mind coming back at another time."

Tim stopped struggling and shrugged his arm. Cooper let go. "Keep talking."

“We’ll get in there,” said Dave. “Alone with Millard, get Cooper’s stake ready, surround the fucker, and strike when it best suits us.”

Tim nodded.

“You just keep your mouth shut and let Julian do all the talking.”

Tim stepped aside and gestured for Julian to lead the way.

Julian swallowed hard. His Charisma score made him the natural choice to be the face of the party, but he hated being in a position of leadership. This was a particularly sticky situation. He barely knew Tim in the real world. It wasn’t his place to lead his sister’s murder vengeance. What if he screwed up? All their lives were on the line.

“Julian,” said Tim.

“Huh?”

“Are you up for this?” Tim’s eyes were pink and watery.

“Yeah,” said Julian. “Of course. But listen. You guys have got to keep your shit together. We can’t take those two door guards. And once they disarm us, all we’ve got going for us is a wooden stick up Cooper’s ass. We have to play this cool. We’re just here for a routine visit, right?”

Cooper, Dave, and Stuart nodded. Tim closed his eyes.

“Tim?” said Julian. Tim nodded.

Julian took a deep breath and stepped out into the open, and the others filed in behind him. As expected, Horace and Boris stood at the front entrance of the fort like two massive iron statues. An occasional blink was the only sign they gave that they were alive.

“Evening, gentlemen!” Julian called out as cheerfully as he could. “How goes the watch?”

Horace curled up one side of his upper lip, exposing his brown teeth. Boris spit on the ground. It landed among a multitude of other spit puddles in a semi-circular pattern radiating about three feet from his boots.

Julian stopped his advance a solid few inches before the arc of spittle. Never so clearly defined was the border of a person’s personal space. He forced his lips into a wide smile. “We seek audience with the lady of the house. I present to you my weapon so that you may keep it safe during our visit.” He held his quarterstaff in front of him sideways, resting on his palms.

“The master still sleeps,” said Horace. “You’ll have to come back later.”

Boris spit on the ground again.

Julian looked west. The sun was naught but a sliver of red on a rocky grey horizon. He turned to the group in the hope that one of them would suggest a next course of action. Tim stood hidden behind Cooper. Dave shrugged. Cooper picked his nose.

“Allow me,” said Stuart. He stepped forward, removing the hood

from his smooth bald head. He raised his arms out to the side in an exaggerated gesture of peace. “Good sirs! We are but humble travelers. I beseech thee to recon –”

As soon as Stuart stepped over the spit threshold, Boris moved like a viper. He grabbed Stuart by the shoulders and put an armored knee in his junk.

“Oooh,” said Cooper, wincing. “Right in the chakras.”

Julian stepped back, his hands tightening around his quarterstaff. Horace’s face caught his eye. His eyebrows were raised, and his smile revealed more of his brown teeth. Why was he smiling?

“Julian!” shouted Dave. “What are you doing?”

“Huh?” said Julian. Horace’s eyes were on his quarterstaff. It occurred to Julian that the way he was holding it might be mistaken for aggression.

“Wait,” said Julian. “No. You don’t think that I was –” he stumbled on some rocks as he continued his slow backward retreat. Horace began to unsheathe his sword, and the echo of steel sliding against leather meant that Boris was doing the same thing. “Hold on now, guys! I wasn’t –”

It was too late. Cooper was unstrapping his axe and Dave was readying his bow. Julian couldn’t see Tim, and Stuart was still rolling on the ground cradling his nuts. He’d fucked it all up, and now they were going to die before they even got to see the vampire.

“Been a while since we killed us an elf,” said Horace. “Eh, Boris?” Boris spit on the ground. “Must be goin’ on weeks.”

“You’ve got the wrong idea,” said Julian, holding his stick out in front of him. The rational part of his brain told him to drop it. This was all a misunderstanding, after all. There’s no way the hulking giant wielding the sharpened steel fence post could misinterpret that.

The panicked stupidity center of his brain, however, was way more active at present, and told him to hold onto that stick like it was the rope leading out of hell.

“Can’t remember the last time an elf raised a weapon at me,” said Horace. He raised his sword. “I gots to tell you. I’m really gonner enjoy this.”

“No!” shouted Cooper. He stepped between Horace and Julian and swung his great axe.

With all the passion of a supermarket checkout clerk, Horace stepped out of the way of the axe, twisted Cooper’s arm behind his back with his free hand, and smashed the hilt of his sword into Cooper’s face. Cooper fell to his knees spitting blood through his hands.

“My fucking teef!” Cooper spat.

Within the space of one second, Horace had disabled the party’s

strongest fighter, and his eyes had only briefly flickered away from Julian. What did this guy have against him? Maybe he just hates elves. Fucking racist.

Horace continued his slow advance, and Julian braced himself for what he hoped would be a swift death.

“Enough!” Millard’s voice boomed down from atop the wall.

Horace’s face went from gleeful, murderous hate to annoyance, but he lowered his sword.

“These men are my friends,” Millard continued. “And they shall be treated with every courtesy.” Millard’s form was silhouetted against the purple evening sky. He stood alone.

Julian looked back at Tim, and the kettle-about-to-boil look on his face told Julian that this detail had not escaped Tim’s notice. Julian shook his head slowly. Tim closed his eyes and inhaled.

“Kindly relieve these gentlemen of their weapons and allow them inside.” And with that, Millard disappeared behind a crenellation.

“No hard feelings, huh?” said Dave as he handed over his mace and holy symbol. Boris took them, spat on the holy symbol, and tossed them in the weapons box.

When the weapons were all safely boxed away, the red light descended through the crack between the doors. When it reached the bottom, Horace and Boris opened the doors.

“Hey guys,” said Katherine, standing alone in the doorway. She was dressed in a grey cotton turtleneck, with pants to match. It was an odd look. She might have been going to the gym or to the library. Somehow it suited her.

An awkward moment of silence passed as everyone stood slack-jawed in the doorway.

“What’s up?”

“Kat!” said Tim. He ran up and hugged her around one leg, smearing tears and snot on her cotton pants.

“Come on, guys,” said Julian, nudging the rest of the group through the doors which were still being held open by the impatient-looking psychopath guards.

“What the hell, little brother?” said Katherine. She looked uncomfortable as she patted his head. They were obviously not a very huggy family.

When the doors were fully closed behind them, Dave spoke up. “We thought you were dead. We thought Millard killed you.”

“Ha!” Katherine said. “Millard’s in love with me. He’d never kill me. He’s done just the opposite, in fact.”

“Oh,” said Dave. “That’s nice, I guess.”

“Wait a second,” said Julian. “Your character sheet said you were dead. We all saw it. And anyway, what does that even mean? What’s

the opposite of killing somebody? *Not* killing them?"

"He's given me eternal life."

Tim pushed away from his sister and looked up at her face.

"Is this a Jesus thing?" asked Cooper. "Cause I don't want to –"

"Shut up, Cooper," said Tim.

"Okay."

"Katherine," said Tim. "Tell me you didn't."

"I did."

"Why would you...?" said Tim. "How could you...? What were you thinking?"

"Good evening, gentlemen!" said Millard, suddenly appearing at the other end of the foyer.

"Why you creepy son of a who—" said Tim.

Cooper grabbed him before he even completed his first step. He clapped one hand over his mouth and held him up against his chest with his other arm. Cooper winced a bit as Tim bit his hand, but he didn't let go. He was careful to keep Tim's flailing legs away from his balls.

"Um..." said Cooper. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Katherine's a vampire," said Dave.

"Oh," said Cooper. "Sweet."

"I see you've already given away our little surprise," said Millard.

Katherine shrugged. "Sorry."

"The little fellow seems to have gotten himself pretty worked up at the news."

"Yeah," said Katherine. "He's... um... thrilled."

Cooper lowered his head to Tim's ear. "Dude," he whispered. "Chill the fuck out."

Tim stopped biting Cooper's hand and nodded his head. Cooper set him down. Tim spat out half-orc blood and filth and wiped his face with his sleeve.

Cooper held up his bleeding hand to Dave. He was still bleeding out of his own mouth as well. "I'm gonna need your help when I get back."

"Of course," said Dave.

"Hold on," said Julian. "Back from where?"

"I've got to use the bathroom," said Cooper. "If that's all right with you."

"By all means," said Millard. "You remember how to get there, I trust."

"Yeah, yeah," said Cooper. "Last door on the left."

"Are you sure you need to go?" asked Julian.

"I've got something inside me," said Cooper impatiently, "that needs to come out."

“Ew,” said Katherine. “We don’t need a play-by-play. Just go do your business.”

Julian rubbed his hands together. They might not have to follow through with the plan. If Cooper came back with a wooden stake in his hand, there would be no turning back. “Shouldn’t we talk about it first?”

Katherine and Millard stared at Julian. Tim, Dave, and Stuart stared down at their feet.

“Cooper,” said Katherine. “Go to the bathroom, now.” Cooper ran down the hallway with his hands clapped over the back of his loincloth. “Your new friend’s a fucking weirdo, Tim.”

“I didn’t mean...,” Julian stopped. It didn’t matter. He walked over to where Tim, Dave, and Stuart were standing. “Do you mind if we have a word alone?” he asked Millard.

“Be my guest!” said Millard. “Katherine, dear. Why don’t you help me in the kitchen? We can fetch some snacks for our visitors.”

When Millard and Katherine had gone, Julian made his case. “Do you guys think we still need to go through with this?” he whispered.

“Go through with what?” said Tim.

“Killing Millard.”

“Fuck yes,” said Tim. “He killed my sister.”

“Well he didn’t really,” said Julian. “She doesn’t look very dead to me.”

“He’s right,” said Dave. “The situation has changed.”

“He’s kept her here as a captive since we got into town. It’s fucking Stockholm syndrome.”

“She seemed pretty happy to me,” said Dave.

“You know he’s got her under some kind of vampire mind control. Maybe she was happy enough sleeping in a bed rather than on the floor of a bar, I’ll grant you. But there’s no way she would have chosen to become a vampire.”

“I think I remember her going through a Goth phase at some point.”

“That was ten fucking years ago!”

“Listen,” said Julian. “All I’m saying is that, in light of these new developments, maybe we should give it some more thought. Talk about it some more, you know?”

Tim angrily struggled for a counter-argument. “Damn it, Julian. Did you just use Diplomacy on me?”

Julian lowered his eyes. “Yes.”

“Fuck,” said Tim. “What do you guys think?”

“I agree with Julian,” said Dave. “It can’t hurt to wait and talk about it some more.”

“Stuart?”

“She’s your sister, man,” said Stuart. “It’s your call.”

“Fuck,” said Tim. “Fine. I’ll hold off until after dinner to make a decision.”

“If Cooper comes back in here waving a wooden stake around, there won’t be any decision to make.”

Tim took in a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. He nodded his head in the direction of the hallway.

Julian didn’t need to be told twice. He ran off in search of Cooper. At the end of the hallway, he found the door he was looking for. He knocked. No answer.

“Cooper?” he whispered. No answer. He pushed the door to see if it was locked and found that it opened easily.

The bathroom was a cylindrical room made of cobblestone and mortar. A constant stream of water flowed in from somewhere outside through a hole in the wall up near the ceiling. It kept the floor wet and reasonably clean. It drained out through a hole in the center of the floor.

Julian bent over and looked through the hole. Beneath what he sincerely hoped was a solidly constructed floor, was wide open space. It might be two or three hundred feet to the rocky earth below. He stepped back, though he didn’t expect he’d be in danger of falling through the hole. He might be able to squeeze himself through if he were contemplating the most undignified suicide ever, but only just. He’d warn Tim. Tim could probably fall through if he wasn’t careful. Cooper could never get through there, which begged the question, where the hell was Cooper?

“Hey,” said a voice right behind him.

Julian’s heart just about exploded out of his chest as he whirled around. The wet floor was slippery, and Julian lost his footing. Naturally, he fell straight into the drainage hole. His stomach seemed to stay exactly where it was while the rest of him dropped three feet. It wasn’t as tight a squeeze as he’d imagined, and the tenuous grip he had on the floor with his elbows and forearms wasn’t going to last long.

When Julian’s eyes were able to readjust after the drop, they homed in on the tip of a giant penis aimed at his face.

“Wha!” said Julian.

“Grab it!” said the voice. It was Cooper’s voice. “I’ll pull you up!”

Beyond the penis was an arm. Cooper’s arm. Julian took hold of the dildo-stake, and Cooper pulled him out of the hole.

“What the hell, man?” said Julian.

“Sorry, dude,” said Cooper. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I could have died!”

Cooper frowned. “I said I was sorry.” He looked pitiful with his missing teeth and his cheek bruised and beginning to swell. Disgusting

as he was, it was hard to stay mad at him.

"Where were you anyway?" asked Julian. "Did you get lost again?"

"I was –"

"It doesn't matter. We don't have time. We've got to get that dildo back up your ass."

"What!" said Cooper. "Are you fucking kidding me? It's been up there all day. Do you know how uncomfortable that is? I only just took it out!"

"We're aborting the plan," said Julian. "At least for now."

"Um..." Cooper lowered his head. "That may be a problem."

"Why?"

"I just pissed in Millard's coffin."

"You did what!" Julian pulled on the ends of his giant elf ears.

"Why would you do that? What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I thought if the fight didn't go our way, I'd give him something to remember us by."

"Shit!" said Julian. "What are we going to do? I can't talk our way out of this. What kind of Diplomacy roll do I have to make to apologize for my friend pissing in a guy's coffin?"

"Maybe tell him it's a sign of respect in orcish culture?"

"He'll never buy that."

"He might."

"He's not fucking retarded!"

"That's it," said Cooper. "Tell him I'm retarded."

"I don't think anyone fucking questions that!"

"Hey, man. I have feelings, you know."

Julian wanted nothing more than to take that dildo out of Cooper's hand and club him with it. Cooper looked back at him with pouty, bleeding lips and watery eyes. Snot trickled out of his nostrils. Julian gave up.

"I'm sorry, Cooper."

"It's okay."

"I've got to think, and we've got to get this stake back up your ass."

"I'm really tender down there."

Julian sighed. "Hey, I think I've got something that might help. Did you wash that?"

"I rinsed it in the bathroom."

Julian had to admit, it looked a lot cleaner than he thought it would, considering where it had spent most of the day. "Give it here."

Cooper handed Julian the stake. Julian held it by the pointy end. It really was remarkable that something this big could fit all the way up a person's ass.

"Grease," said Julian. He felt the familiar pins and needles of magic coursing through his free arm as he concentrated. He waved his hand

slowly over the shaft. As his hand passed, he left a coating of thick yellow liquid on the weapon. When the tip of the penis end was coated, the magic left his arm.

“Lube,” said Cooper. “Good idea.”

“Bend over.”

“Be gentle.” Cooper got down on his hands and knees. Supporting himself with one hand, he used the other to lift the back of his loincloth.

Julian shuddered. It wasn’t all that long ago that sexually assaulting a half-orc was well beyond the boundaries of his imagination. He held his breath, stabilized himself with his free hand on Cooper’s back, and placed the tip of the dildo on Cooper’s hole.

“Pardon me, sir.” The familiar British voice was accompanied by the flapping of wings. “Your absence has gone noticed, and – oh, I’m terribly sorry.”

“This isn’t what it looks like,” said Julian.

“I’m sure it looks like nothing I’m familiar with, sir,” said Ravenus.

“Dude,” said Cooper. “I need a certain amount of concentration for this. I can’t loosen up with your fucking bird squawking in my ear.”

“Tell them we’ll be out in just a minute, Ravenus.”

“Of course, sir,” said the bird. “Right away.” He flew off.

In the end, the deed proved much easier than Julian had anticipated. That Grease spell was amazing.

Cooper and Julian stood up and brushed themselves off.

“I trust this is a secret we’ll both carry with us to the grave,” said Julian. Cooper nodded.

“What happened to you two?” said Katherine as they entered the dining room. “You fall in?”

Cooper snorted. “Funny you should mention that, because Julian –”

“Shut up, Cooper,” said Julian. His nearly dying in a toilet was one more secret he’d like them both to take to the grave.

“Gentlemen,” said Millard, standing at the head of the table. “Come, you must be hungry. Eat your soup before it cools. I trust everyone likes lamb?”

Tim sat down and started immediately. Whatever his feelings toward his host, they were apparently set aside for hunger at the moment. Julian would have to wait a while for his appetite to return after having just stared into Cooper’s dark abyss, but a chair to sit in was well appreciated. Cooper walked over to where Dave was sitting.

“Your visit couldn’t have come at a better time,” Millard continued. “I just want you all to know that we both put a lot of thought into this. Sweet Katherine and I finally decided that we wanted to spend the rest of eternity together.”

Tim set his spoon down a notch harder than what proper decorum

dictated was appropriate. "You mean *you* decided."

"I beg your pardon?" said Millard.

"Cut the shit," said Tim. "We all know you've got Katherine under your vampire mind control or whatever."

Julian forced some soup down his throat. It might yet come to a fight after all. At least that would solve his coffin piss problem. Cooper and Dave had stopped their discussion. All eyes in the room were either on Millard or Tim.

"I assure you, young sir," said Millard. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

"I can think for myself, Tim," said Katherine.

"I know that!" said Tim, slapping a hand down on the table. "But right now –"

"Please," said Millard. He stood up. "It's clear you have a special relationship to my Katherine. I owe you the truth."

Tim raised his eyebrows and relaxed his posture. "I'm listening."

Millard folded his hands and lowered his head. "It shames me to admit this, but there is some truth in what the Halfling says. On the night I met Katherine, I used my vampiric power of Glamour to seduce her."

"I told you!" said Tim. It was unclear whom he was addressing. "I've been saying that the whole time!"

"But you must understand," said Millard. "That is only a temporary effect. It wore off after a few days. Beyond that, the choice to remain here was her own."

"He's right, Tim," said Katherine. "I chose to stay here. And I chose to become a vampire. Think about it. Wealth, eternal youth, no more worries."

"No," said Tim. "I can't –"

"You can't do anything about it," said Katherine. "I think that's what's really bothering you. You're a control freak. You always have been. Even here, in this imaginary world we're stuck in, you've been trying to take responsibility for everyone. You need to let the people you care about make choices for themselves. Even if you think they're making a mistake, you need to just let go."

"But he..." Tim stopped. "Shit. I don't know. Maybe you're right." He leaned back in his chair. "You know what? Fuck it. I'm done. What's done is done, right?" He looked around the room.

Everyone responded uncertainly with shrugs, confused nods, and a general sense of relief. They might not have to fight to the death after all.

"If this makes you happy," said Tim. "then who am I to tell you what to do? Congratulations, and I'm happy for you both."

Katherine smiled. "Do you really mean that?"

Tim smiled back. "You know what, Kat. I really think I do."

"For a half-elf and a halfling," said Millard, "you two have a most peculiar relationship. You must tell me more about it."

"You wouldn't believe us if we did," said Tim.

"There you go, you stingy bastard," Cooper said to Dave.

"Everybody is happy as pigs in shit. Can you spare a fucking Heal spell now?"

Dave looked over at Tim. Tim nodded.

"I heal thee," said Dave, touching Cooper on the arm.

Cooper leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He groaned as his teeth worked their way back to their proper positions and his swollen lips returned to normal. When it was over, he sighed.

The sound that followed was a clatter of wood on stone. And a fart. Julian's heart skipped a beat.

Millard stood up. "What was that?" He was smiling.

Julian scanned the table. Millard was the only one smiling.

Katherine looked annoyed and disgusted. Chaz just looked exhausted. Everyone else – everyone who knew – looked crestfallen and terrified.

"Sorry," said Cooper. He looked at Julian. "It was the Grease. It just fell out." He bent over to pick it up.

"Cooper!" Julian shouted. He sprang up out of his chair and darted to where Cooper had been standing and dropped to his knees. They were out of Millard's field of vision, but they couldn't stay that way for long. Julian grabbed the dildo-stake to keep Cooper from standing up with it.

"Is everything okay down there?" asked Millard.

"Whatever you do," whispered Julian, "keep the pointy end hidden." Cooper looked confused, so Julian explained further. "He mustn't know that we came here to kill him. We can still get out of this alive if he thinks we're just a couple of homosexuals." Cooper nodded. The two of them slowly rose to their feet.

"What the hell is going –" Katherine paused briefly when she saw the giant wooden penis in Cooper's hand. "WHAT THE FUCK?"

"I'm sorry," said Julian as diplomatically as he could. "This is –"

"What is the meaning of this?" roared Millard.

Julian found it odd that Millard wasn't shouting at him and Cooper. His anger seemed to be directed at Katherine. The look on Katherine's face suggested that she found it just as odd.

Millard's voice dropped down to a whimper. "You told them, didn't you?"

It took Katherine a moment to work out Millard's accusation, but finally the light of understanding shone in her eyes. "Is that what this is about?" She turned on Tim. "Real fucking mature, Tim!" she said. "I told you that in confidence, so that you wouldn't worry about me!"

Tim looked as confused as his sister had until the implications finally clicked for him as well. "Hang on a second!" said Tim, standing up. "This didn't have anything to do with your erectile dysfunction! If you must know, we were going to –"

"It's ours!" Julian said. "Cooper and I are gay for each other. There, I've said it."

All eyes in the room shifted from Julian to Cooper.

"It's true," said Cooper. "We're total queers." Julian elbowed him in the leg, but it seemed to have no effect. "Nothing I love more than elf man-ass. Isn't that right, um... Honey?"

Julian buried his face in his hands, too embarrassed to be scared.

Millard fell back into his chair. "I've never been so humiliated."

"Millard, sweetie," Katherine said in as comforting a tone as Julian had ever heard her speak. "These guys are insensitive jerks, but –"

"Silence!" Millard pointed at Katherine. "I'll deal with you once I've dealt with your friends."

His voice was changing. Something between human and the growl of a bear. His eyes turned red, and his upper and lower canine teeth grew long and sharp. He turned his head slowly toward Julian and Cooper, all the while dragging his elongated fingernails across the tabletop, leaving deep grooves in the wood.

"You think it's funny?" Millard growled at them. "You come into a man's house. The man feeds you." He stepped out from his place at the head of the table, counter-clockwise, toward the other end, where Julian and Cooper stood. "Gives you drink." He grabbed Stuart's goblet, still half full of wine, and threw it against the wall. "Extends you every courtesy!"

Snot shot out of Cooper's nostrils as he failed to suppress a giggle. Everyone looked at him.

"What?" Cooper said defensively. "Come on. Considering the circumstances, it was a poor choice of –"

"Shut up, damn you!" shouted Millard, grabbing a hefty iron candlestick. "For once, I wish you would just... shut... up!" He hurled the candlestick at Cooper's head. Cooper raised his arms to block it, but it flew right between them and hit him in the face. The dildo clattered to the floor.

"Ow," said Cooper, rubbing his cheek. "Not cool, man. That could have gone in my eye."

The candlestick had left a nasty mark on Cooper's face. Julian guessed that it might have amounted to at least six or seven Hit Points' worth of damage.

Millard stepped back and gasped. He wrapped his cape tightly around his chest. His eyes were focused on the dildo on the floor, but no longer at the penis end.

“You sneaking little cowards,” he said. “It’s not enough you come into my house and mock me. But you sought to murder me in my sleep as well.”

“In his sleep!” Julian said to himself. “Why didn’t that occur to any of us?”

The horror on Millard’s face slowly changed into an evil grin as he turned his head to Katherine. “Oh, sweet Katherine. We shall feast well tonight.” He lunged forward at Cooper.

“Millard!” Katherine cried. “No!”

Millard hit Cooper like a truck, and the two of them flew about six feet through the air before tumbling to the stone floor together. When they stopped rolling, Millard straddled Cooper’s chest, pinning his massive arms to the floor. Vampires must be stronger than they look, because Cooper appeared to be losing the struggle against what appeared to be a relatively weak-looking man. Millard’s irises flashed yellow as he moved his mouth toward the pulsing arteries in Cooper’s neck.

Julian picked up the dildo and clubbed Millard over the head with the penis end. Millard hissed in pain.

“Julian!” Tim shouted. “What are you doing? Use the –”

Whatever else Tim said after that was lost to Julian, as Millard backhanded him in the chest, sending him in a full backflip to belly flop on the floor. *Damn, that was stupid.*

The next couple of seconds were just a blur of vision and noise. The first comprehensible thing Julian heard was –

“I’m... really... angry!”

Julian forced his eyes to focus. The battle seemed to have taken a turn. Cooper had hulked out, and he and Millard slowly circled one another. Julian hadn’t expected to do a whole lot of damage to a vampire by clubbing him in the head, but he’d hit the guy pretty hard, and was sure he’d seen a small splatter of blood and heard the crack of breaking skull. But now, with Millard’s back to him, Julian couldn’t make out that even a follicle of hair was out of place on the vampire’s head.

Dave and Tim stood back helplessly, their eyes darting back and forth between the two combatants and Katherine. Katherine appeared to be suffering from some kind of headache. Her eyes were closed, and she had one hand clapped over her mouth. Chaz stood well back from everyone else and began to strum the first few notes of ‘Holly Holy’. Stuart was... *where was Stuart?*

The answer came flying in from Julian’s right periphery.

“Yaaaaaaaaa!” Stuart screamed as he ran. That bald bastard could move. He flew through the air, his arms and legs flailing around too fast to keep up with. He might have had six of each from what Julian

could tell. He assaulted Millard with a flurry of elbows, knees, and fists.

Katherine dropped to one knee, cradling her head in her hands. Her canine teeth grew sharp and pointed. Her tongue ran down them and across her lips. Julian had seen enough vampire movies to recognize her struggle between loyalties, and her thirst.

He couldn't do anything about her choosing between her brother or her sire, but he might be able to use her thirst to their advantage. Keep her from having to pick a side.

Julian pointed a finger at Katherine. "Horse!" he shouted over the sounds of Stuart beating the shit out of Millard. A white pony appeared before Katherine. Its coat shimmered like a beacon in the gloom. It offered a friendly whinny as if to say "Thank you for calling me into existence. How may I be of service?". Without the slightest hesitation, Katherine wrapped her arms around its neck and bit deep into its throat.

Stuart actually had Millard on the retreat. The vampire backed away slowly as the monk continued his bare-handed assault. When there was nowhere to back up to, Millard made his move. He grabbed Stuart by the throat, slammed him against the stone wall, and threw his stunned, limp body out the window.

Dave gasped.

"Fuck me," said Tim. "He just killed Stuart."

Cooper had taken the opportunity to pick up the dildo-stake. His right hand was wrapped around the penis end, and he brandished the pointy end at Millard.

"Finish this!" Tim shouted at Cooper. "The rules say that a wooden stake through the heart will instantly slay a vampire!"

That would have been a nice piece of information to be privy to a few minutes ago.

Millard spat in Tim's direction, but didn't take his eyes off of Cooper. The vampire's hair was disheveled, and his face was bruised. He was even bleeding from the lip a little. Stuart's bare-handed assault had apparently done more real damage than Julian clubbing him over the head.

"Fuck you!" Cooper roared as he closed the distance between himself and Millard. He grabbed the vampire by the throat and plunged the stake deep into his gut. Millard hissed and coughed up a gob of dark red blood.

"His heart, stupid!" said Tim.

"Do I look like a fucking doctor to you?" Cooper shouted back.

Millard reached under Cooper's arms and pulled himself up to his

neck. He bit down hard.

“Raaaaauuuurrrrggghh!” Cooper screamed as Millard’s fingernails tore deep gashes into his back. “Look, I’m sorry your dick doesn’t work, but I – Fuck, that hurts!”

Cooper’s skin began to grow paler as sweat poured down his back. His ratty dark hair turned grey. All the while, the cuts and bruises on Millard’s face vanished. The vampire’s own gut seemed to be slowly forcing the stake out.

Cooper pulled the stake all the way out. A heart shot wasn’t going to be possible, as the two were practically hugging one another. He shoved the stake up through the vampire’s left armpit. The tip poked out of Millard’s shoulder and carved a gash from cheek to temple.

Millard screamed and lost his hold on Cooper’s neck. The gash on his face closed itself up, but his left arm went limp.

Cooper broke away from the vampire’s right arm as well and stumbled backward. When Julian got a look at Cooper’s face, he appeared to have aged ten years. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks hollow, his sweaty brow stretched taught against his half-orc skull.

“What happened to you?” asked Julian..

“I’m all right,” said Cooper. “I just...” He panted. “I just need a minute.”

Millard hadn’t appeared to be in any better shape than Cooper. But in the brief moment Julian had taken his eyes off of him, he had recuperated far better. The vampire still leaned against the stone window sill on his good arm, and looked as though it was an effort for him to remain standing. The bottom half of his otherwise pale face was covered in a thick layer of Cooper’s blood. It dripped all over his fine clothes. He bared his fangs at Julian in a wicked grin that sent shivers down his slender elven spine.

Julian’s eyes traveled down the length of the vampire’s crippled arm down to the hand. The fingers started to wiggle.

“Shit!” said Julian. “Cooper! He’s getting his strength back! Hurry and finish him off!”

Cooper shambled forward, looking as if it was all he could do to keep upright and keep the stake in his hand.

Millard smiled as Cooper approached him. His left arm still hung limply at his side, but he opened and closed his left hand a couple of times, as if just to demonstrate that he was able to. Each time he did it, he winced a little less.

Cooper wasn’t in any shape for this. He’d be dead before he even got an attack in. But still he shuffled forward.

“Come on,” taunted Millard. His voice was like a wounded bear shouting through an electric fan. “You filthy pathetic beast! I’ll rip your – Yaaahhh!”

Millard's head jerked back as he screamed. He had something around his neck. It looked like... It was an elbow. Quick as a wink, the vampire's left arm disappeared behind him. Millard's howl of agony wasn't quite enough to drown out the sound of his shoulder re-snapping.

Stuart poked his head out from behind the writhing vampire. "Come on man!" he shouted. "Finish this bastard!"

Cooper mustered up what little strength he had left and sped up his shuffle. He held the stake up and prepared to strike.

"Make it count!" shouted Tim.

As Cooper shoved the stake at him, Millard's body exploded into a cloud of red mist. Stuart fell forward into Cooper, catching the stake in his gut. Cooper fell backward, landing hard on the stone floor with Stuart on top of him. Six inches of sharpened wood protruded from Stuart's back.

"Oh my god!" said Dave. "You killed Stuart!"

Cooper groaned in response. The groan grew louder, as if he were trying to awaken from a bad dream, until it was cut short by a quick gush of vomit.

"He's not dead," said Tim.

"How can you be sure?" asked Dave.

"I can't, but you can. Go fix him."

Julian, Dave, and Tim pulled Stuart's body off of Cooper. Julian wrapped the corner of his serape around his hand before gripping the penis end of the stake. With one swift motion, he pulled it out of Stuart. Stuart's body shuddered, and blood spilled out of his mouth.

"Make it quick," said Tim.

Dave licked his lips and put his hand on Stuart's head. "I heal thee."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Stuart's body started to convulse, and he coughed up the remaining blood in his mouth. When his eyes opened, everyone exhaled at once and stood up to let him writhe around on the floor alone.

"He'll be fine," said Dave.

Julian helped Cooper to his feet. He was far easier to pull up than he should have been. "You all right?"

"C-c-cold," said Cooper, hugging himself.

"You look like shit," said Tim.

"F-f-fuck you," said Cooper, though there was little spirit in his voice.

Dave laid a hand on Cooper's unusually bony shoulder. "I heal thee."

The gaping bite wound on Cooper's neck closed up, and his shoulders hunched with the ecstasy of being healed, but even all patched up, he appeared far from whole. A tiny mouse fart squeaked

out of him.

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Julian.

“Constitution damage,” said Chaz. “I’d bet anything.”

Having left their equipment outside, there was no way to confirm Chaz’s diagnosis, but it seemed reasonable enough. If anyone would know, it would be him.

Julian noticed that everything he was looking at was tainted pink. The mist from the vampire’s exploding body still hung stagnantly in the air. It neither dissipated nor coalesced into droplets. It merely hung in the air, as if waiting. It made Julian feel uneasy.

“I’m sorry about Millard,” Tim said to his sister.

Katherine smiled at him. Her fangs, while not as pronounced as Millard’s had been, were still unnerving. “Don’t be,” she said. She shifted her gaze from Tim to... well, to nothing in particular. She just stared into the heart of the mist cloud. Her irises flashed yellow.

“Millard, honey. Don’t be gone long. I can’t eat all of this by myself.”

A cavernous laugh echoed all around them. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once. Julian could feel the laugh inside his ears, in his nose, even in his eyes.

“You miserable little worms,” said Millard’s disembodied voice.

“You didn’t think you could come into my house and destroy me so easily, did you?” The pink mist swirled around them.

Cooper staggered, and Julian put an arm around his waist to support him.

“When I return, I’ll be completely restored, unlike your orc friend here.” A higher concentration of mist formed a pink whirlwind around Cooper. He feebly attempted to wave it away.

“Don’t worry, though,” the mist laughed as it spoke. “He won’t be nearly so weak once he is reborn.”

A wave of pink mist rushed toward Dave. “And you, my good holy man,” The mist swirled around Dave’s beard. Dave waved his arms around like he was being attacked by bees, but it made no difference to the mist. “How much more healing will your god grant you before the well runs dry?”

The densest part of the mist abandoned Dave’s beard and flew over to Chaz. “Did I tell you to stop playing?”

Chaz nervously gripped his lute and picked up where he’d left off on the song.

The air cleared as all the mist in the room concentrated itself before Katherine. Pink darkened to red as it took on a vague human form, but was still nothing close to solid. “Sweet Katherine.” The cloud form looked down at her. “Wait for me. I shan’t be long.”

Katherine opened her mouth to kiss the head of the cloud. Just as the tip of her tongue made contact, the form exploded back into a

pink vapor.

The mist then took the shape of an arrow, or a rocket, or some kind of pointed missile, and flew down the hall and out of sight.

“He’s going back to his coffin!” said Dave. “He’ll be back to full strength in a matter of minutes if we don’t get to him. We have to destroy it.”

Katherine moved like a striking cobra. One stride off the floor, the next off the wall, a back flip through the air, and landed on her feet between Dave and the hallway. She hissed at Dave and bared her fangs.

Dave stepped back. “Katherine,” he said. “I’m sorry we have to do this. I know you’re confused, but –”

“No!” said Katherine. “I won’t let you kill him. He’s been nothing but gentle to me this whole time and...” She took a moment to glare at everyone in the room. “You are the ones who have been acting like assholes. It’s no wonder he wants to kill you all.”

“She’s right,” said Cooper in a raspy voice.

“She’s what?” said Dave.

Cooper lowered the giant dildo in his hand. “It was an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

Julian looked at Cooper quizzically. The big guy didn’t have the brainpower to be plotting a ruse.

“Cooper,” said Dave. “Look at what he’s done to you. You look like somebody’s deformed grandfather.”

“The guy’s sensitive about his limp dick, and we attacked him with a dildo,” said Cooper. “I’d have attacked us, too, if I were in his place.”

“Cooper’s right,” said Tim. “We should just leave before he... um... recharges or whatever.”

“I don’t believe I’m hearing this!” said Dave. “We’re so close! Tim, this guy killed your sister. Cooper, you were so intent on killing him that you concealed a two foot wooden dick in your ass all day. Think of the Experience Points we could get. Think of the treasure he must have hidden around here somewhere. We could have the money to pay off a wizard and get back home. Isn’t that what we wanted? What about the plan?”

“We’ll find another way,” said Tim. “Katherine is right. Millard’s been a decent guy. Katherine’s decision to let him turn her was hers to make. We’ve acted like dicks.”

Dave sighed in resignation.

“We’ll just go back to the Whore’s Head for now,” Tim continued. “Give it some time, send an apology, and –”

A howl of pain exploded out from the hallway and echoed off the stone walls of the dining room. A second later it was joined by

Katherine, also howling in pain. She cupped her hands over her temples and dropped to her knees. As quickly as it had started, the howl stopped, and Katherine fell into a catatonic trance.

Chapter 20

Dave's armor rattled as he trembled inside it. He wasn't sure if he was more unnerved by the howls or by Katherine's dead, glassy-eyed gaze.

"The fuck was that?" said Cooper. He stepped past Katherine into the hallway.

"Wait," said Dave. Cooper, as usual, ignored him.

"Shit," said Tim. He leaned Katherine's dazed body against the wall. He looked up at Chaz. "Keep an eye on them, would you?" he said, gesturing to Katherine and Stuart.

Tim and Julian hurried after Cooper. Dave, against his better judgment, stomped off after them.

"It's locked," said Cooper, standing before a solid wooden door.

"I don't have my lock picks on me," said Tim. "Does anyone have a toothpick or a paper clip or something?"

Cooper coughed. It was a wet cough that sounded as though it had come from the very bottom of his lungs. "Fuck it," he said. He punched the door, and it swung open.

Pop! Pop! Click! Thwang! Snap! Clatter. The final sound was the dildo falling out of Cooper's hand onto the floor. Cooper soon followed, collapsing backward. He had three crossbow bolts sticking out of his torso, and one more in his thigh.

"Shit!" said Tim. "Booby traps! Everybody back up!" Dave and Julian took a step back from the doorway.

Tim moved cautiously to the door frame and scanned it closely from top to bottom. He licked his lips and slowly nodded his head. Then he reached inside, grabbed the doorknob, and quickly pulled the door shut. Two more bolts thunked into the wood from the other side.

"Dave," said Tim. "Heal Cooper." He dropped to his knees and plucked the bolts out of Cooper's chest and leg.

"It's my last one for the day," said Dave.

"Good." Tim glared up at Dave. "Well fucking use it already."

Dave knelt next to Cooper. "I heal thee," he said without much enthusiasm.

The holes in Cooper's body closed up, but he barely twitched at all. He opened his eyes.

"How you doing, big guy?" asked Tim.

"I'm having a rotten fucking day," Cooper groaned.

Tim and Julian helped Cooper to his feet.

"Nudge the door open a bit, would you?" Tim asked Julian.

Julian pressed his back against the wall as flat as he could and reached out sideways to push the door open. The hinges whined as the

door inched into the room.

"That's enough," said Tim when there was a four inch gap to look through. "Jesus Christ!" Tim whispered.

Dave stepped behind Tim. Being a good foot taller, he had a good view over Tim's head. Through the gap in the doorway, he could see crossbows mounted all over the wall, attached to a series of strings, wires, and pulleys.

"Can you disarm them?" asked Dave.

"Sure," said Tim. "If you feel like waiting around a few weeks. I've got a better idea." He stopped the door where it was with his foot and looked at Julian. "Can I borrow your serape?"

"Sure." Julian pulled the garment over his head and handed it to Tim.

"Thanks," Tim said, wrapping one end of the serape around his hand. He picked up the dildo.

"Hey, man!" said Julian. "I have to wear that."

"Sorry," said Tim. He threw the dildo deep into the room and pulled the door shut.

Julian and Tim put their ears to the door and listened. The expressions on their faces gradually morphed from hopeful anticipation to disappointment.

"Did it work?" asked Dave.

"I sprang a few traps," said Tim. "But not enough to make all that big a difference."

Julian patted Tim on the shoulder. "It was a good idea."

Tim shrugged. "Thanks." He gave Julian his serape.

"Let me try."

"Try what?"

Julian pushed the door open just a couple of inches and looked inside.

"Julian," said Tim. "What the hell are you doing?"

"You guys may want to turn around," said Julian. "And maybe cover your ears or something."

"What?" said Dave.

"Oh no!" said Tim. "Julian, don't!"

"Horse," said Julian. He pulled the door shut.

Dave, Cooper, and Tim winced. They didn't need their ears to the door to hear the cacophony of snaps, clicks, thwangs, thuds, clatters, smashes, crashes and tortured equine screams. It all came as a sudden explosion of noise. Thankfully, the horse noises only lasted a few seconds. The crossbows continued snapping and popping like the three-minute mark on a bag of microwave popcorn. Then five or six more residual traps fired off at greater intervals. And then nothing.

"Dude," said Dave. "What have you got against horses?"

"It had to be done."

"And that," said Tim, "is how you disarm a room full of traps." He cautiously pushed the door open, just an inch at a time, until it was wide enough for everyone to walk through. At one point, a crossbow on the far wall, dangling on a web of strings, fired its payload straight into the floor. The malfunction likely had something to do with the four bolts that were sticking out of it.

"That's one hell of a security system," said Dave.

Crossbows covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Nearly half of them were damaged beyond repair, having been struck too many times by their fellows. Their spent bolts lay all over the floor. There was a conspicuously dense concentration of them marking the spot where the horse had been summoned. At least two dozen more bolts stuck out of the back of the door. The only area unaffected was a six inch perimeter around the coffin at the center of the room.

"None of this shit was in here thirty minutes ago," said Cooper.

"What are you talking about?" asked Tim.

"Well," said Cooper. "I mean, the coffin was here. And the hooks and braces were mounted on the walls already, but I didn't know what they were for. All of these crossbows, and all this string and shit. They weren't here."

"That's impossible," said Tim. "All this shit had to come from somewhere. There aren't any closets or cupboards in here. You must have been in a different room."

"I'm telling you, man," said Cooper. "I was in this room, and it was empty, save for that bag over there, and this coffin. I know, because I pissed in it."

"You did what?" Tim sighed. "Never mind. Let's just get this over with. Get the stake ready."

"I thought we agreed not to kill him," said Julian.

"Yeah, well he might not be too keen on conversation after recuperating inside a piss-soaked coffin. If he jumps out and starts attacking us, I'd like to be ready for that."

Tim made a good point. Dave picked up the stake and pulled five bolts out of it. It was so slippery that he could barely hold onto it. He forced himself not to speculate as to what the oily substance coating it might be. He stood over the coffin and looked at Cooper.

"Ready?" asked Cooper, his fingers on the edge of the lid, ready to lift.

Dave shook his head. He concentrated on his breathing until he got it under control. His heart was beating so hard he thought it might punch through his breastplate. "On three."

Cooper nodded.

"One, two... three!"

Cooper lifted the lid, and Dave was knocked back by a waft of putrid-smelling air. It was unlike anything he'd ever smelled before, but if he had to guess, it was probably a combination of rotten corpse and half-orc piss.

He dropped to his knees and vomited on the floor.

"Jesus!" Tim cried. "What is that?"

Dave wiped his mouth with his leopard-furred forearm and got to his feet. Through watery eyes, he looked into the coffin. He only recognized Millard because of the clothes the body was wearing. The flesh was charred and cracked. The withered black arms were twisted over its face in a defensive position, covering everything but the fanged mouth, still wide open from the poor bastard's final scream.

"For fuck's sake," Julian choked out the words. "Close it already!"

Cooper appeared to be unaffected by the odor. He closed the lid. The smell of death and piss remained strong in the stagnant air.

"What happened?" asked Julian.

"Who knows?" said Tim. "Kat's gonna be pissed."

"The plan worked," said Dave.

"What are you talking about?" asked Tim.

Dave shook his head and laughed. "The plan was for Cooper to smuggle in a weapon, right?"

"Yeah, so? We kind of botched it with the stake. That's not what did him in."

"No," said Dave. "I'm not talking about the weapon he smuggled in with his ass. I'm talking about the one he smuggled in with his bladder."

"What?" asked Cooper.

"Holy water," said Julian. "Remember, you drank half the fountain at the temple of Rapha?"

Tim pursed his lips and nodded his head slowly. "I'm sorry he had to die. But I've got to hand it to you, Coop. That was brilliant."

Cooper scratched his balls under his loincloth. "Um... thanks."

"Julian," said Tim. "Why don't you do a quick Detect Magic scan of the room to see if any of these crossbows and shit are magical?"

"Okay," said Julian. "Detect Magic," he mumbled to himself. His eyes glowed white. He scanned the walls, but said nothing. He looked down at the coffin, and then at Cooper's loincloth. "Ew."

"What is it?" asked Tim.

"It's like CSI," said Julian. "Dave was right about the holy water. Cooper's piss is glowing blue."

He looked over at Tim, and then at Dave. His jaw dropped open.

"Shit," said Dave, brushing his hands over his armor. "Did Cooper piss on me?"

"No, behind you!" said Julian excitedly. "That bag is magical! Or

something in it at least.”

“This?” said Dave, picking up the bag. It didn’t look or feel magical. It was made of thick, rough leather. Loosening the drawstring, he looked inside. “There’s nothing in it.”

Julian switched off his Detect Magic spell, and his eyes returned to normal.

“Well I can only tell you what I saw,” said Julian. “It was glowing bright green when I had my spell going.”

“I will admit,” said Dave. “It is kind of heavy for an empty bag.”

“Give it here,” said Tim. “I think I know what this is.”

Dave lowered the bag, and Tim reached an arm inside.

“Gold,” said Tim. When he pulled his hand out of the bag, it was full of shiny gold coins.

“Holy crap!” said Dave. “A Bag of Holding!”

“What’s a Bag of Holding?” asked Julian.

“It’s a bag with extra-dimensional space inside it,” Tim explained.

“Okay,” said Julian. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You can put as much shit as you want in there, and it just disappears into the bag. The bag itself doesn’t get any bigger or heavier.”

“Like Mary Poppins?”

Tim shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much exactly like that.”

“Chim-chimney!”

“Well,” said Dave. “I guess that explains where all the crossbows and shit came from.”

“Gold!” said Tim, and pulled out another fistful of coins. “Do you guys know what this means? We can buy our way back home!”

“We’ve got to get out of here first,” said Dave. “Horace and Boris are still out there. They’re likely to be suspicious if we try to walk out of here with Katherine and Chaz.”

Tim frowned. “Shit. You’re right.” He looked around. “Any ideas?”

Julian shook his head. Cooper barely seemed to have heard the question.

“Let’s go check on the others,” said Tim. “We’ll brainstorm.”

Back in the dining room, Stuart still lay on the floor, groaning in pain. Katherine knelt beside him, licking his spilled blood off the floor.

“Kat!” shouted Tim. “What the fuck?”

Katherine whirled around and hissed, baring fangs and fingernails. She had a bright red circle on the tip of her nose, and her mouth and chin were completely covered in blood. After the initial surprise wore off, she lowered her hands and her head and covered her face.

“I’m sorry,” she said between sobs. “I couldn’t help myself.”

Tim walked up to his sister. “I know, Kat. It’s okay so long as you don’t actually take any out of his body.” He cleared his throat. “Listen.

I've got some more bad news for you. I'll just come right out and say it. Millard's dead." He hung his head.

Katherine lowered her hands and looked down at Tim through teary eyes. "Millard! Who gives a fuck about Millard? Look at me! I'm a freak! I was just lapping up blood off the floor like a dog, and you're grieving over the bastard that did this to me?"

"But I thought you –"

"Look at my teeth!" she cried. "I had to wear braces for six years! And for what?"

"Fucking vampire mind control," Tim muttered.

"And my skin!" Katherine went on. "Do you know how much time I've spent on the beach, trying to get the perfect tan? Now I'm white as a –"

The room was suddenly silent as Cooper brought the Bag of Holding down over Katherine's head.

"Sorry dude," said Cooper. "I've got a big fucking headache." He held out the bag to Tim. "Here's your sister."

"Dude," said Tim. "She can't breathe in there!"

"The rules say you can breathe for up to ten minutes," said Cooper.

"She's a vampire," said Dave. "She doesn't need to breathe."

"Oh yeah," said Tim. He set the bag down. "We need to think."

"I'm really tired," said Cooper.

"You're dumber than a bag of shit," said Tim. "Go get some rest."

"Thanks, man." Cooper patted Tim on the shoulder and lumbered to the corner. He curled up on the floor and started snoring almost immediately.

Tim rubbed his chin and stared out at nothing. "We've got Katherine taken care of. She can stay in there indefinitely. If we can get all our shit from the guards and get out of sight within ten minutes, we can get Chaz and Stuart out of here as well, without raising any suspicion."

"And if we can't?" said Dave.

"Then they'll suffocate."

"I say we give it some more thought," said Chaz, lazily strumming his lute.

"If you've got any ideas," said Tim, "I'd love to hear them."

"I may have an idea," said Julian, walking over to the window. He poked his head out and looked down. "What if we could just bypass the guards altogether?"

"That would be lovely," said Tim. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Maybe," said Julian. "No, never mind. It's stupid."

"Name a single idea we've had since we've been here that wasn't stupid."

"Yeah," Julian conceded. "But I don't –"

"Spit it out," said Tim.

Julian pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the window.

"What?" said Dave. "Climb down the cliff? Look at me!" He waved his thick, stubby arms and pointed down at his thick, stubby legs. "I won't make it ten feet before I fall."

"It's okay," said Tim. "We're brainstorming. I'll listen to any ideas, but Dave's got a point. I don't see how we could possibly –"

"I wasn't talking about climbing," said Julian.

"Flying?" asked Tim eagerly.

"Falling," said Julian.

"Brilliant," said Dave. "What's your Intelligence score?"

"Imagination is more important than intelligence," said Julian. "Einstein said that."

"He also had some things to say about physics that you might be interested in," said Dave. "A body in motion tends to stay in motion until it smashes into the ground in a huge pulpy dead mess. Sound familiar?"

"I think that was Newton," said Tim.

"How about we quit screwing around and think of a real plan?" said Dave.

"Hold on a minute," said Tim. "I'm sure there was more to Julian's idea than us merely leaping to our deaths. Right, Julian?"

"As a matter of fact, there was," said Julian. He looked at Dave.

Dave sighed. "Carry on."

"We'll get in the Bag of Holding," said Julian.

"Interesting," said Tim.

Dave shook his head. "Come on, guys," he pleaded. "Don't tell me you're really considering this."

"Calm down, Dave," said Tim. "Let's at least think it through."

"What's there to think through? He's talking about shoving us all in a bag and chucking us out the goddamn window! That's exactly why I wanted to move the conversation along. I knew he was going to suggest something crazy, and you were going to think it was brilliant."

"Dude, relax," said Tim. "No final decisions have been made yet. We're exploring our options."

"How is this even an option?" cried Dave. "If you fall three hundred feet and hit solid earth, you're going to die, whether or not you're in a fucking bag!"

"But there's that extra-dimensional space, or whatever, inside the bag," said Julian.

"You've got some extra-dimensional space between your stupid giant ears," said Dave.

"Hey now," said Tim. "This isn't productive. Why not do a trial

run?"

"Okay," said Dave. "I'll throw one of you out the window, and we'll observe the results. Any volunteers?"

"I was thinking on a smaller scale," said Tim. "Julian, why don't you get in the bag? And Dave, you climb up on the table and throw the bag down on the floor."

"I don't know," said Julian.

"You know what?" said Dave. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure right now than stuffing Julian in a bag and throwing him onto the floor. Let's do this." He struggled to climb up onto a chair, and then hefted himself onto the table.

"Fine," Julian said. "Let's get it over with."

*

Dave stood on the table, a wide grin dividing his bearded face. He held the Bag of Holding out in front of him. Just for good measure, he gave it a vigorous shake.

Tim looked up at him with his hands on his hips. "What are you doing?"

"Science," said Dave. "We want to have as much data as possible, right?"

"Let's just get this over with."

"Okay," said Dave. "On three." He swung the bag around over his head as he counted.

"Dave!" Tim protested.

"Ha ha!" said Dave. "One! Two! Three!" He released the bag, sending it soaring across the room. His heart skipped a beat as it flew toward the window. He hadn't meant to throw it that way. But it just hit the wall about a foot away from the window, and dropped to the floor.

"Damn it, Dave!" said Tim. "Be careful!"

Tim hurried over to the bag and put his hand inside. "Julian."

Julian spilled out of the bag headfirst, tackling Tim in the process. "Holy crap," he said.

Tim wiggled out from under him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," said Julian. He remained on his hands and knees. "I think so. I just wasn't ready for —"

He threw up.

"See there!" shouted Dave triumphantly. "I told you! This was a stupid idea from the beginning!"

"Are you hurt?" Tim asked Julian.

"No," Julian said, wiping his ever filthier sleeve across his mouth. "I just wasn't expecting the whole zero-gravity thing."

"So you didn't feel shaken, or like you were smashing into a wall or

a floor or anything?"

"No," said Julian. "Nothing like that. It was actually really peaceful in there, except for your sister."

"You saw Katherine?"

"Yeah. She said to tell you guys to go fuck yourselves for putting her in a bag, and that she does not consent to being thrown out of a window."

"I don't know," said Tim. "I'm convinced. Care to weigh in, Chaz?"

Chaz stopped strumming his lute. "Anything to get out of here."

"This is insane!" said Dave. "Hold on," he paused for a relieved sigh. "If we're all in the bag, who's going to throw it out the window?"

"Shit," said Tim. "Julian?"

"I don't know," said Julian. "I hadn't worked out all the details. If we got Stuart back up to full strength, he could probably scale the cliff face and meet us at the bottom."

Dave searched his brain for a counter argument. "But he won't be able to get down there in ten minutes. Who's going to let us out of the bag?"

Game. Set. Match. Time to start thinking of a new plan.

"Ravenus!" said Julian.

Fuck.

"Sir?" said the bird.

"Do you think you could pull me out of a bag?"

"I would make what small effort I could, sir. But you are much larger than me."

"Let's give it a try." Julian picked up the Bag of Holding and pulled it over his head. It engulfed him, and fell to the floor.

"I say," said Ravenus. "That was rather impressive. Um... now what do I do?"

Dave sighed. "You have to go put your beak, or talon, or whatever, in the bag and say his name."

Ravenus cocked his head sideways and looked at Dave. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh for Christ's sake." Dave took a moment to warm up his British accent. "Blimey, guv'nor," he mumbled to himself. "You 'ave to put your 'ead in the bag, and say 'is name... bloke."

"Ah," said Ravenus. "Very well." He hopped up to the bag and tucked his head inside. "Master Julian, sir?"

Ravenus flew up just in time to avoid being crushed by Julian spilling out of the bag.

Julian lay on his back and grinned. "It's not so bad once you get used to it. Give me a second to orientate myself."

"Satisfied?" Tim asked Dave.

"No!" said Dave.

Tim frowned. "Well if you've got any better ideas, feel free to share them. In the meantime, I'm going to get some rest. You get your healing spells back at dawn, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well then you have until then to come up with something better. Otherwise, you patch up Stuart in the morning, and we get the hell out of here."

"Millard's fort, you mean?"

"With any luck, that's not what I mean at all."

Chapter 21

Cooper had just taken the first bite out of the biggest hot dog he'd ever eaten. It was a good six feet long, and as thick as a fat man's neck, but somehow he was able to open his mouth wide enough to take that first bite. The bun was made of interwoven strips of bacon, and it crunched when he bit into it. It was a moment of bliss.

As he chewed that first bite, he heard some kind of buzzing in his ear, like a mosquito had gotten stuck in there. His body shook back and forth, and his hot dog escaped his grasp.

"No!" he cried. The hot dog hovered in front of him. The two halves of the bacon-bun stretched out to either side and morphed into crispy, bacon-colored bat wings. A head began to sprout out of the frank where he'd bitten into it. A human head. Millard's head.

"No!" Cooper cried again. He thought it might be a good idea to spit out the bit he had in his mouth, but opted to swallow it instead.

Hot dog Millard grinned down at him as he flapped his bacon wings. The buzzing in Cooper's ear grew louder. The sound began to take form.

"Cooper!" the mosquito buzzed. "Cooper, wake up!"

"Huh? What?" Cooper blinked. He was on a stone floor. Tim was standing over him, pushing and kicking him.

"Fucking vampires," said Cooper. "All I wanted was a hot dog."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Tim. "Come on, we have to get out of here."

"Right," said Cooper. He got to his feet. He felt a little better than he had the night before, but still pretty shitty. "So did you guys come up with a plan?"

"Yeah," said Dave bitterly. "We're all going to get in the Bag of Holding, and Stuart's going to chuck us out the window."

"Sweet!" said Cooper. "That's brilliant. Whose idea was that?"

"Mine," said Julian.

"Well done, man!"

Dave hung his head. "Unfucking-believable."

Stuart was twisting, stretching, and being generally annoying, like he was getting ready for a ballet recital. "The fuck's up with him?"

"He's limbering up," said Tim. "We're all going to take the express bus, but Stuart, being the one to throw the bag out the window, has to climb down the cliff the old fashioned way." He turned to Stuart. "You're sure you're okay with this?"

"Not a problem," said Stuart, one leg raised high over his head. "I've got eight ranks in the Climb skill. The surface is rough. Plenty of handholds and footholds. The Difficulty Check shouldn't be too bad."

"It's a long way down, though."

"In real life, I'm shockingly afraid of heights," said Stuart. "It's kind of refreshing not to be. I'm looking forward to this."

"What if you roll a 1?" asked Dave.

Stuart shrugged. "Catch me?"

"I'm sorry I stabbed you," said Cooper.

"Are you really?"

"Well," Cooper scratched his head. "I was when I thought you were going to die. But now that you're okay, I feel better about it. I've wanted to stab you for a while now."

"Okay," said Tim. "Well, time's wasting. If we're going to do this, let's do it."

"Is there still an *if* option left?" asked Dave.

"Did you come up with anything?"

Dave scowled. "No."

"Well," said Tim. "There's your answer. Get in the bag." He took a knee and opened the bag.

"This is so stupid," said Dave. He stepped into the bag and appeared to sink straight into the floor. When the tip of his helmet sank below the rim, he disappeared completely.

"Awesome," said Cooper.

"Who's next?" asked Tim.

"I've been in there before," said Julian. "I'll go." Julian stepped into the bag.

"Please get me out of here," said Katherine's bard friend. He crossed the room in three strides and leapt into the bag.

"Don't forget Butter Nuts," said Cooper, carrying Katherine's wolf. It voiced its annoyance with a small growl, but didn't make a move to bite Cooper's face off, for which Cooper was thankful. He set the wolf down in the open bag. It let out a small yelp before its head disappeared.

"Coop?" said Tim.

"After you."

Tim shrugged and jumped in.

"See you on the bottom," Cooper said to Stuart. "Don't take too long to throw the bag. We've only got ten minutes in there, and the clock is already ticking."

Stuart jumped up and down three times with his arms stretched out sideways. "Well then you'd better get moving."

Cooper, putting his trust in a guy who had made him shove a giant dildo up his own ass, grabbed the Bag of Holding and pulled it over his head.

The universe was completely dark as Cooper floated in space. There was no up or down. He waved his arms around and occasionally

brushed against small metallic objects floating by him. He managed to grab one. Feeling it between his thumb and forefinger, he determined it was a coin.

“Bwah!” Cooper recognized the voice as Dave’s. “What’s that smell?”

“I think Cooper made it,” said Tim’s voice. “That you, Coop?”

“Uh...” Cooper was uncomfortable talking to people he couldn’t see. “Yeah.”

“Julian,” said Tim. “Can we get some light in here?”

“Good idea,” said Julian’s voice. A brief pause followed, then “Light.”

Cooper was struck with awe that he felt inadequate to describe. It was stunning. They were floating in what seemed like an infinite void of inky blackness, but Julian’s light shone off of hundreds, maybe thousands of floating coins. Some gold. Some silver. Some copper. A few precious stones reflected and refracted the light as well. It was almost like a child’s misinformed vision of what it might be like to float around in space among the stars.

“Oh my god!” cried the bard, who had apparently only just realized that he was stuck in a perpetual somersault. He waved his arms and legs around, but was unable to keep himself from spinning head over foot. “I think I’m going to be sick.” This proved prophetic as he spewed a spiral of vomit which radiated from his spinning form.

“Oh man,” said Dave. “That’s so —” Dave then contributed his own stream of puke.

Between the bard’s galactic spiral of puke and Dave’s vomit comet, the interior was looking more like space with each passing second.

“Jesus, guys!” said Katherine. “Try a little self-control, why don’t you?”

“Maybe the light was a bad idea,” said Tim. He was looking a little green himself as he floated, from Cooper’s perspective, upside-down.

“Do you want me to put it out?” asked Julian, who seemed to be handling the lack of gravity and orientation quite well.

“No,” said Cooper. “Wait.” His eyes had been casually following Dave’s stream of vomit as it followed a straight and true course away from Dave. The front end of it suddenly disappeared into the blackness, as if it had reached the end of the universe. “Did you see that?”

“What?” asked Julian.

“Dave’s puke,” said Cooper. “It’s gone. It just disappeared.”

“Well that’s a good thing, right?” said Katherine.

“I don’t know,” said Cooper. He was getting panicky. He wanted out of this bag. He looked around, trying to keep track of where the glittering coins turned into void, so that he could keep well away from

"That fucking rocked!" said Tim. "Do it again!"

"Hang on, guys," said Julian. "I just thought of something."

"What is it?" asked Tim. His huge grin shrank to a cautious smile."

"There's enough air in here for ten minutes, right?"

"Yeah," said Tim. "So what? That's plenty of time for Stuart to throw us out the window and Ravenus to come fetch us. Hell, we're probably safely on the ground already."

"But that ten minutes," Julian continued. "That's just for one person, right?"

Tim's smile evaporated completely. "Shit," he said. "There's six of us."

"Six," said Katherine. "Don't forget Butterbean."

"I was counting Butterbean," said Tim. "I wasn't counting you."

"Fuck you, jerk!"

"You're a vampire," said Tim. "You don't breathe."

"Oh, right," said Katherine. She looked down at her feet. "Sorry."

"These may be my last words," said Dave. "And I'd like to use them to point out that I thought this was a monumentally stupid idea from the beginning."

"Fuck you, Dave," said Cooper. He scooped up some of Dave's puke from his neck and threw it at Dave.

"Hey!" said Dave, waving his hands helplessly at the approaching vomit glob. He managed to slap it, and it exploded into a billion tiny specks, radiating out in every direction.

"Maybe," Julian said. There was a certain edge to his voice.

"Instead of shouting at one another, we should be trying to conserve our breath."

Cooper instinctively considered suggesting that maybe Julian could suck his balls, but he held his tongue. Julian was right.

Everyone floated silently, looking at each other with worried expressions on their faces. Now that he thought about it, the air was noticeably stuffier in the bag.

"Just so you know," said Katherine. "If you guys die and I wind up stuck in here, I'm going to have to eat you."

"I'm okay with that," said Cooper.

"Ew," said Katherine. "You'll be last, trust me. And that's if I don't choose to starve first."

"Wha!" said Julian.

When Cooper turned his head to where Julian was floating, he saw nothing but empty space. "Where the fuck did he – Yo!"

Cooper lay on the soft, rich earth, looking up at the speck of a fort atop the high cliff face. He filled his lungs slowly, savoring the crisp morning air. "Fuck, that's high," he said as he exhaled.

"Get off of me," said a muffled voice beneath him.

“Oh shit,” said Cooper. “I’m sorry.” He helped Julian to his feet. “Thanks.”

Ravenus was perched on a low branch of a nearby tree. The plan wouldn’t have succeeded without him.

“Ravenus,” Cooper said, begrudgingly acknowledging the bird.

Ravenus went berserk with ear-stabbing screeches and caws, hopping up and down on the branch and flapping his wings wildly about.

“What the fuck is up with him?”

“He said ‘Your friends are still inside the bag, you big idiot!’ His words.”

“Shit, that’s right,” said Cooper. He reached into the bag. “Tim!”

As soon as he felt Tim’s little arm in his hand, he pulled hard, inadvertently throwing him six feet in the air. He landed a few feet away, gasping deep breaths.

“Dammit, Cooper!” said Tim.

Cooper put his arm in the bag again. “What’s the bard’s name?”

“Wasn’t it something like ‘Jazz’?” asked Julian.

“Shit,” said Tim. “It’s not ‘Jazz’, but yeah, it’s something like that.”

“Jizz?” suggested Cooper.

His suggestion was met only with disapproving glares.

“Fuck it,” said Cooper. “Bard!” He pulled the bard out of the bag. The air rushing into his mouth sounded like a hurricane wind.

“Thanks,” the bard said weakly.

“Butterballs!” said Cooper. The wolf fell out of the bag, panting and sleepy-eyed.

Tim stroked the wolf’s fur. “You okay, big guy?”

“Should I let your sister out?” Cooper asked Tim.

“Get Dave, you ass!”

“Oh yeah,” Cooper chuckled to himself. “Forgot about Dave.” He reached under his loincloth and gave his ass a good, solid scratch. He sniffed his hand. “Fuck, that’s grim.”

He reached his ass-hand into the bag. “Dave,” he muttered. He felt Dave’s arm materialize in his hand. Even without having just summoned him, he would have recognized Dave’s arm for it being covered in leopard fur. He pulled him out and dropped him unceremoniously on the ground.

Dave gasped and sucked in air. When he was able to speak, he croaked out a “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Cooper. He switched the bag to his right hand, and reached in with his left. “Kat.”

When he felt her cold, slender forearm in his hand, he pulled her out gently. She was only halfway out of the bag when her skin started to blister and smoke.

“FUCK!” she screamed. “Put me back!”

Cooper immediately shoved her back in the bag. “What the fuck just happened?”

“She’s a vampire, you idiot!” said Tim. “She can’t go out in the sunlight.”

“Sorry,” said Cooper.

“Let me in there,” said Tim. “I need to see if she’s okay.”

Cooper held the bag open for Tim.

“Give me one minute, and then pull me back out.” Tim stepped into the bag and disappeared.

“Great job, Ravenus,” Julian said to Ravenus. “You really came through for us.”

“Like fuck he did,” said Cooper. “We almost suffocated in there? What the hell took him so long?”

Julian talked some gibberish that Cooper couldn’t understand, and Ravenus screeched and cawed his response.

“He said the bag landed upside down,” explained Julian. “It took him some time to wrestle the opening out from underneath.”

Cooper grinned and sighed. “Takes me back to the night I spent with Dave’s –”

Thwack! Cooper found himself staring at the fletching of an arrow poking out of a tree inches away from his face.

“That was a warning shot,” said a voice behind him. The voice was more calm and confident than Cooper would have liked. “The next one doesn’t have to miss.” Cooper believed the voice. He turned around.

No one was standing in the patch of forest where the voice had come from. From the looks on the others’ faces, Cooper guessed that they, too, had heard the voice, but were also having trouble identifying the source.

“Up here,” said the voice. Cooper looked up. A halfling crouched in the branches of a tree. He wore a green and brown cloak, decked out with twigs and leaves. Even though Cooper was staring right at him, the little bastard was nearly invisible against his surroundings. He had an arrow nocked and pointed right at Cooper.

“What do you want?” asked Cooper.

“That’s a nifty bag you’ve got there,” said the halfling. “How much do you want for it?”

“It’s not for sale,” said Julian.

“Everything’s negotiable.” The halfling chuckled to himself. “But I’m afraid the only currency we’ve got is arrows.” Mirthful chuckles came from at least two other trees, but Cooper dared not take his eyes off the only adversary he’d already spotted, lest he not be able to find him again. “So how many will it take before you’re willing to make a

deal?"

"You're thieves?" asked Dave.

"We're opportunists," said the halfling. "We were just out for a leisurely hunt, and noticed you gentlemen passing by completely unarmed. I must say, that's not too wise a practice in this stretch of wood. You might run into someone dangerous."

More high-pitched laughter chattered out from two of the nearby trees.

"I have to get my friend out first," said Cooper. He began to reach into the bag.

"Uh uh," said the halfling. He pulled his arrow back threateningly. "Not so fast. We're going to do this nice and slow, like. No tricks. Now, what's your friend's name?"

"Um... Dildo," said Cooper.

The halfling laughed. His laughter was joined by his friends in the other trees. "What kind of name is that?"

"It's sort of a nickname, really. We call him Dildo Daggins. It's an inside joke."

The laughter stopped abruptly. "Fine. Here's what's going to happen. You're going to reach very slowly into the bag and say the word 'Dildo'. You're going to pull him out of the bag just as slowly. And then you're going to put the bag on the ground and you're all going to walk away. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

Cooper reached with exaggerated slowness into the Bag of Holding. "Dildo," he said. Cooper felt the hard, veiny wooden cock materialize in his hand. It still had a greasy residue on it. He felt down the shaft to make sure he was holding the penis end, and mentally braced himself for the coming pain.

"Fuck you, hobbit!" Cooper shouted as he whipped the stake out of the bag and flung it at the halfling.

The halfling, true to his word, released his arrow, catching Cooper in the chest.

Pain seared through his pectoral muscles. "Fuck, that hurts!"

The stake had also found its mark, and it pleased Cooper to imagine that the little bastard in the tree was suffering a lot more than he was.

"Magic Miss –" An arrow in the shoulder cut Julian off. Sparks fizzled out of his open palm, but no Magic Missiles shot out.

The halfling screamed and dropped his bow. He looked down in horror at the massive wooden dick poking out of his abdomen. "Why's it so slippery?" he said, pulling it out. He dropped the dildo and grabbed at the branch he was sitting on. His hand slipped. He lost his balance and fell out of the tree.

Cooper jumped on the halfling, ignoring the pain from the two

more arrows which struck him in the back. He wrapped one massive hand around his tiny throat and punched him in the nuts with the other.

“Ooooooh,” the halfling groaned.

“Game’s over, little fucker,” said Cooper. “Call off your friends.” He gave the little guy a moment to comply, knowing all too well how difficult it can be to articulate one’s thoughts right after a punch in the stones. He grunted as another arrow struck him in the back, and one more in his ass.

“Bingbobble! Snickers!” the halfling cried out. “Stand down!”

The arrows stopped.

“Now,” said Cooper. His words were directed at the halfling he had pinned on the ground, but he spoke loudly enough for the others to hear. He gripped the little man’s throat even tighter. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to tell your little friends to drop their weapons and fuck off. I will not suffer the indignity of dying at the hands of people named Bingbobble and Snickers.”

“Do what he says!” the halfling croaked.

Bingbobble and Snickers obediently jumped down from their respective trees and held their bows out as non-threateningly as they could.

“Yah!” said Julian, plucking the arrow out of his shoulder. He walked briskly up to the one nearest to him. “I’ll take that, thank you very much.” He swiped the bow out of the frightened halfling’s hand. The other halfling simply dropped his bow on the ground and held his hands up. “You two run along.”

The two halflings didn’t need to be asked twice. They disappeared into the forest like cockroaches when the lights go on.

Cooper was satisfied at the look of defeat that spread over his captive’s face. “Dave,” he called out. “I could use some help here.”

“Of course,” said Dave. He waddled over to Cooper and lay a hand on his shoulder. “I heal thee.”

Cooper breathed a sigh of relief as arrows fell out of him like needles on a shoddy Christmas tree. His wounds were far less than completely healed, but he’d live to fight another battle. “Thanks. Grab Tim, would you?”

“Sure thing,” said Dave. He reached into the Bag of Holding. “Tim.”

Tim spilled out of the bag. “What took you guys so – what the hell happened here?”

“Ambush,” said Cooper. He stood up, lifting the halfling off the ground by his throat. “It’s been taken care of. How’s Kat?”

“She’s in pretty bad shape,” said Tim. “She needs blood.”

Cooper looked at the frightened prisoner squirming in his hand.

“Sorry, dude.”

“Wait, Cooper,” said Julian. “We should really consider the ethical ramifications of feeding an unarmed prisoner to –”

“Wha–” said the halfling as Cooper shoved it into the Bag of Holding. Cooper looked at Julian and raised his eyebrows.

“Or not,” said Julian.

“Come on, guys,” said Tim. “Let’s make our way back to town before we run into anything else out here.”

“We have to wait for Stuart,” said Dave.

Everyone looked up. Stuart was a tiny speck about a third of the way down the cliff face from Millard’s fort.

“Think there’s any way we could speed this up?” asked Tim.

“I don’t see how,” said Dave. “He’s up there, and we’re down here. The only way to speed it up that I can think of would be to make him fall and try to catch him, which I don’t advise.”

“Crap.”

“I’m going to go pray,” said Dave.

“Good idea,” said Tim. “Stay where we can see you.”

Dave waddled to a tree about twenty feet away and took a knee.

“That’s a good idea,” said Julian. “I’m going to zone out for about twenty minutes, get my spells back.”

“I’ll get my daily allotment of songs ready,” said the bard.

“Well I guess that just leaves you and me,” said Cooper. When Tim didn’t respond, Cooper looked over to find him curled up on the ground, fast asleep. “Poor little guy.”

Cooper looked up. It appeared that Stuart hadn’t moved an inch. Nature, he reflected to himself, is boring as shit. He found a stick and spent the next twenty minutes playing fetch with Butterbean.

“Hey,” said Julian when he’d finally snapped out of his trance.

“This is weird. I used to only be able to cast five first-level spells in a day, and now I can cast six. Also, and I can’t be sure about this until I try, but I think I know how to play the violin.”

“My ass is noticeably less sore,” said Cooper. “And now that I think about it, I get the feeling that if we ever came across a trap of some kind, I would be marginally better at avoiding it. This can only mean one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“We leveled up!”

“Awesome!”

“Wait a second,” said Cooper. “You wasted a skill point learning how to play the violin?”

“I’ve always wanted to learn.”

“What good is that going to do us out here? You don’t even have a fucking violin!”

“What did you spend your Skill Points on?”

"I always dump them into Climb and Swim."

"That's it?"

"I only get two points per level."

"That sucks. Why so few?"

"Because I'm a barbarian. We hit shit with axes. We don't tend to do a lot of violin playing. Also, I get a penalty for being stupid."

"Hey guess what guys!" said the bard, sauntering back with his lute.

"You leveled up," said Cooper.

"Yeah," said the bard. "How'd you know?"

"We all did," said Cooper. "We must have gotten a bunch of Experience Points when we took down a vampire."

"I can inspire competence now," said the bard.

"There's a certain irony in that," said Cooper.

"How so?"

"A bard is about the least competent class there is." Cooper looked up at Stuart. "Outside of monk."

"I'm a support character," said the bard. "A jack-of-all-trades."

"And if being a jack-off was useful, you'd be awesome."

"What's going on?" said Tim, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, hey," said Cooper. "I thought you were sleeping."

"I was," said Tim. "I had a dream that a bunch of assholes were arguing about... oh wait..."

"We all leveled up!" said Julian. "Did you?"

"How should I know," asked Tim. "We left our character sheets at the Whore's Head."

"Cooper can sense traps and I can play the violin!"

"Why the hell did you learn to play the violin?"

"I'll do what I want with my own skill points, thank you very much," Julian snapped. "So what about you, Tim? You notice anything different about yourself?"

"I don't know," said Tim. "I think I may have a better understanding of how kidneys work. It's kind of vague."

"Okay," said Julian. "So maybe you put some Skill Points into healing?"

Tim yawned. "No, I don't think so. It's kind of the opposite of that. I feel like I know how to stab them more effectively. My Sneak Attack damage must have gone up."

They all sat for a while, staring up at Stuart as he ever-so-slowly climbed down the cliff. In fact, he may not have even been moving at all.

"This is taking forever," said Tim.

"Is he stuck?" asked Julian.

"It's a tricky thing," said Cooper. "That's a steep cliff and a long drop. One misstep could be the end of you."

They all stared for a few more minutes before Cooper continued. "But yeah, this is boring as shit. I'm going up after him."

"What makes you think you'll do any better than him?" asked Julian.

"I've maxed out my ranks in Climb," said Cooper. "And I've also got a massive Strength bonus."

"Hold on, Cooper," said Dave, waddling briskly back to the others. "I might be able to help you. Guess what, guys!"

"You leveled up," said Tim.

"Yeah," said Dave. "I guess you all did as well?"

"Uh-huh," said Tim.

"I just picked my first second-level spell, Bull's Strength!" He turned to Cooper. "I can give you an even bigger Strength bonus to help you climb."

Cooper nodded. "Not bad. Thanks. Come to think of it, I can boost my Strength as well if I go into a rage. I'll be able to climb like a motherfucker!"

"I can inspire competence!" said the bard.

Cooper wanted to laugh at him, but it was quite a climb, and he'd take whatever help he could get.

"I can," Julian started enthusiastically, but it quickly faded. "I'm pretty much the same. I can cast Magic Missiles and summon horses."

"I can't see that as being of much use in this particular situation," said Tim. "Why don't you just hang back with me and watch the show. It'll be interesting to see what Cooper looks like with a Strength of 28."

They walked toward the cliff until the incline increased enough so that it was more climbing than walking.

"Let's do this," said Cooper.

The bard readied his lute and started strumming the beginning of 'Eye of the Tiger'.

Cooper nodded in rhythm with the music. "Yeah!" he shouted. "Good choice." His heart rate picked up, and he knew he was about to climb like he'd never climbed before. "Come on, Dave! Give it to me!" He held up his hand for a high-five.

"I um," said Dave. "I imbue thee with Bull's Strength." He high-fived Cooper.

Cooper suddenly began to feel like a shaken up beer can as his blood fizzed inside him. If he'd been wearing a shirt before, he'd be tearing the shit out of it right now. His biceps grew to the size of watermelons. His man-tits ballooned out into firm pectoral muscles. His legs grew as thick as punching bags. "Fuck yeah!"

"Get moving," said Dave. "I'm not sure how long this lasts."

"I'm really angry!" said Cooper. His vision went red and blurry. His

muscles expanded so much that he couldn't even put his arms down. His friends backed away from him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Cooper looked up and found Stuart. He loped up the cliff face like a lion runs on the open savannah. It felt less like climbing and more like shoving a mountain out of his way. He was halfway up to Stuart in no time.

"Hey, Stuart!" he tried to say, but it came out as "WWWRRAAAAAUUUURRGHH!!!"

Stuart looked down at him, nearly lost his already-tenuous hold on the rock, and shrieked. He immediately started trying to scramble back up to Millard's Fort. He didn't stand a chance. Cooper was on him within seconds.

Cooper scooped up Stuart with an arm bigger than the monk's whole body and threw him over his shoulder. Descending the cliff was a breeze. It was more a matter of letting himself fall, grabbing a random handhold every now and again to slow him down.

Once they were safely on the ground, Cooper dropped Stuart and ripped the nearest tree out of the ground, just because he could.

"Cooper!" Tim shouted. It was barely audible through the noise of blood rushing through his ears.

"BRRAAAUUUUHHHH!!" He answered. And the tree started to get heavier. His body was shrinking. He came out of his rage. "Wha?" Still hugging the tree, he collapsed under its weight and fell backwards. "Fuck."

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Tim.

"Sorry," said Cooper. "I got carried away. Can you guys get this fucking tree off me?"

Chapter 22

Dave's entire body ached. They were just a few blocks away from the Whore's Head, and he wanted nothing more than a shot glass, and a nice big bottle of stonepiss.

The cool evening breeze on his face provided little relief against the heat of the cast-iron pot he felt like he was wearing. If he ever had to go through this again, he'd be a rogue, or maybe even a monk. Any class that didn't wear armor was fine with him. He was sweating up a swamp. His scalp and face itched. He was probably crawling with lice. And the smell! He was nearly as bad as Cooper. It wasn't just the usual sweat and body odor, though that was certainly present. The leopard fur on his forearm reeked of something worse than shit... like supershit or something. And smoke? Wait... why did he smell like...

"Guys!" Dave said. "Look ahead." A column of black smoke cut through the pink twilit sky. "Is that coming from where I think it's coming from?"

"The Whore's Head!" said Stuart. "Rose!" He bolted ahead like a bipedal cheetah. That monk could move.

"Shit!" said Tim. "Come on, guys. Move your asses!" He took off after Stuart.

"Tim, wait!" said Cooper. "You don't know what's... ah, fuck." Cooper followed Tim.

One by one, they each disappeared around a corner.

"Come on, Dave," said Julian, picking up his own pace to a brisk walk.

"I'm going as fast as I can," said Dave. He tried to ignore the pain in his knees and the weight of his armor.

Dave's worries were confirmed when he rounded the corner. The Whore's Head Inn was on fire. Or at least it had been very recently. No open flames were visible, but the smoke was thick and black. Bodies lined the street outside. Some were squirming and moaning. It was the ones which were doing neither that Dave worried most about.

The only person Dave recognized immediately was Frank. Whatever had happened, he had taken some of it. The little gnome hobbled among the injured on a makeshift crutch, barking orders at the few clerics in the group who were able to move.

"Tend to the other clerics first!" shouted Frank. "And then to anyone who has any ranks in the Heal skill. Somebody get a head count!"

Cooper ran out of the front entrance with a body tucked under each arm. He was hacking and coughing. He set the bodies on the ground and turned away to throw up. No sooner did he spill his guts than he

was running back inside.

One of the front windows exploded into a billion glass shards as a barstool sailed out through it. The window vomited yet another plume of black smoke. Stuart poked his head out through the smoke and sucked in some air. Then he disappeared into the smoke once more. Seconds later, a Halfling flew out of the same window and landed hard on the ground among the broken glass. Dave winced.

An elf was kneeling over the body of a fat human woman. It must have been that girl Rhonda. "I think she's dead," he said, patting her forehead with a wet cloth.

"Then there's nothing you can do for her, goddammit!" shouted Frank. "Move on to someone else!"

The shaken elf hurried off to find another patient to attend to.

Frank's eyes met Dave's. "Don't just stand around!" he said. "Heal someone!"

"I'm sorry," said Dave. "I'm... I'm all tapped out."

"Then do something," said Frank. "Anything!"

Dave waddled up to the first body he came across. A gnome.

"Help me," said the gnome, reaching a hand out to Dave.

Dave's heart dropped into his stomach as he pretended not to see or hear him. The poor bastard looked to be in a lot of pain, but the fact that he could call out for help at all put him at a lower priority than a lot of the people lying around here.

He found an elf, his face black with soot except for the stream of blood which flowed out from his forehead. This guy wasn't moving. Dave ripped off the elf's shirtsleeve and wrapped it tight around the wound on his head. He hoped it would be enough.

The second window exploded in the front of the building. The barstool responsible didn't fly out this time. Instead it swiped back and forth a couple of times against the bottom of the frame, removing any jagged pieces of glass. The stool then disappeared into the smoke, and a human body fell backward out of the window and landed unconsciously on the ground. Stuart poked his head through the newly formed avenue of smoke, sucked in some air, and disappeared again.

Dave scrambled around, looking for someone else to help, when he spotted Stuart once more. This time he was inching backward out of the doorway. He had Tim's limp body tucked under one arm, and he was dragging what Dave was certain was Cooper's foot with his other hand. Dave hurried toward him.

Stuart dropped Tim on the ground and grabbed Cooper's other foot. They were all well out of the door by the time Dave reached them, and the smoke was beginning to thin out.

"Where's Julian?" asked Dave.

Stuart coughed hard until he finally spat out a gob of dark brown phlegm. "He's still in there. He's putting out the last of the small fires."

Dave moved as fast as he could toward the doorway, only to be tackled by Julian as he burst through the smoke. He fell backward with a *splat*. He didn't even have to look. He knew he had just fallen into Cooper's vomit puddle.

Julian rolled off of Dave, took a few deep breaths, and stood up. "That's it," he said. "The fires are all out, and there's nobody else in there."

"Are you sure?" asked Frank.

"Yeah," said Julian, his eyes red and watery. "You can see through the smoke now, and I used a Light spell to scan the whole place. It's clear."

"He's right," said Tony the Elf. "I just finished counting. Everyone is accounted for."

"How bad is it?" asked Frank.

Tony the Elf frowned. "It's not good," he murmured. "Thirteen injured. Eighteen unconscious but stable." He hung his head. "Two dead."

Frank sighed. "I saw Rhonda. Who's the other one?"

"Gorgonzola."

"Goddammit!" shouted Frank. He threw down the scrap of wood he'd been using for a crutch. His left leg must have been burnt pretty bad under his tattered pants, as he lost his balance and had to be supported by Tony the Elf.

The clatter of wood against the cobblestoned road woke Tim. "Huh?" he said. "What happened?"

"Those fucking *horsemen* happened," said Frank. "All four of them burst in this time, demanding to know what happened to Mordred. Said they didn't buy the story about him being in Pensacola. When we denied knowing anything about it, the wizard – 'War', he calls himself now – fucking Fireballed us. We were so surprised, our group didn't get so much as a Magic Missile off before they sealed the door shut from the outside." He gestured at the ground.

A heavy chain was wrapped around a support beam of a different building at one end, and locked to the door's iron window bars, which had since been ripped out of the door and were lying in the street.

"That chain was just long enough to be taut," said Frank. "You know what that tells me?"

Tim wiped away wet soot from under his eye. "They measured it beforehand."

"Too fucking right they did," said Frank. "This was pre-fucking-meditated."

“We should have just told them about these new guys,” said Tony the Elf. “They killed Mordred, and this idiot,” he kicked Cooper’s prone body in the gut. “He went and antagonized them.”

Cooper farted.

“Knock it off!” said Frank, still holding onto Tony the Elf for support. “If you want to blame somebody, you can blame the bastards who set the place on fire!” He yanked hard on Tony the Elf’s tunic until the elf looked down at him. “That half-dead half-orc on the ground there, he pulled out at least three people out of this place. Now I saw that with my own two eyes.”

“I don’t think –”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think,” said Frank. “Don’t even tell me you didn’t know it was going to come to this sooner or later. As soon as those fuckers leveled up to the point where they thought they could take out all of us, that’s exactly what they were going to do.” He pointed a finger at Cooper. “If this guy hadn’t shown a little backbone when he did, they might have waited a couple more weeks, but then they surely would have killed us all.”

“You don’t know that,” said Tony the Elf. “And even if it’s true, what’s to keep them from doing that anyway? They’re no weaker for the effort, but we sure as hell are.”

Frank frowned. The elf had a point. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe we can be more prepared next time... or something.”

“How are we going to be more prepared?” said Tony the Elf. “Two of our number are dead. Half of the rest are a paper-cut away from death, and we don’t even have a place to stay anymore.”

“I said I don’t fucking know, all right?” Frank let go of Tony the Elf and sat on the ground.

“Hey, um... Frank?” said Tim. “I might be able to help with Rhonda and Gorgonzola.”

Anger flashed through Frank’s eyes, but he didn’t have the energy to sustain it. The anger withered to a look of exhaustion. “Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“Could I speak to you inside?”

Frank furrowed his bushy eyebrows. “You want to go back in there?” He looked past Tim into the smoky remains of the Whore’s Head Inn.

“We can talk in the arms cellar,” said Tim. “It should be less smoky in there. This isn’t something I’d like to discuss out here on the street.”

Frank sighed. “Fine.”

“Dave,” said Tim. “Help him up, would you?”

“Sure,” said Dave. He reached down, and Frank accepted his help.

“Tony,” Frank said wearily. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. Do you mind keeping an eye on things up here for a minute.”

“Sure thing,” said Tony the Elf.

“Julian,” said Tim. “You keep an eye on Cooper. His gaze flickered toward Tony the Elf and back. Julian nodded.

The cellar was indeed less smoky than the ground floor, but it was still far from pleasant. Dave’s eyes stung as he helped the crippled gnome down the creaky wooden stairs.

“So what’s this help you speak of?” asked Frank, not sounding at all hopeful.

“It’s just like you said before,” said Tim. “We can get them resurrected.”

Frank let go of Dave and hopped to a wooden crate. He sat down. “About that.” He looked down at the dirt floor. “I was kind of just blowing smoke up your ass. I felt bad for you, losing your sister and all, and I just didn’t know what else to say. Truth is, I shouldn’t have filled you with false hope.”

“I don’t understand,” said Tim. “What’s the problem?”

“Wherever you go,” said Frank. “Whoever you are. Money. That’s the problem. That’s always the problem. Sure, you can go down to the Temple of Rapha and get your buddy brought back from the dead... for a price. Even the weakest spell, Raise Dead, is gonna set you back a good six grand a pop. Even if we sold the goddamn building, we wouldn’t get half that much. Especially considering the state it’s in.”

“What if I told you I could get the money?”

“Where the fuck are you going to come up with twelve thousand gold pieces?”

Tim reached inside the Bag of Holding. “Twelve thousand gold pieces,” he said. Gold coins spilled out over his hand like a slot-machine jackpot. It seemed to continue forever, piling up in a mound of gold on the floor, until it finally did stop.

“Holy fucking hell,” said Frank. “What the fuck have you boys been up to?”

“Just what we set out to do,” said Tim, flashing a white toothy grin across his soot-stained face. “We killed a vampire.”

Frank shook his head. “You crazy sons of bitches. Your scrotum must be made of two Bags of Holding.”

Tim laughed, which was something Dave couldn’t recall seeing in a long time.

“Listen,” said Tim. “If you take those two down to the Temple of Rapha, it’s probably not a good idea to mention any association with us.”

“Should I ask?”

“Probably not.”

“And you’re sister? She’s...”

Tim looked down at the bag. “She’s been in better states.”

"I'm really sorry, man."

"I'll be all right," said Tim. "It's just not something I want to talk about right now."

"Of course not."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Frank. "I guess we're going to clear out the smoke, fortify the entrance, and lick our wounds. Getting Rhonda and Gorgonzola back will boost morale. That's for sure. What about you?"

"We should have a bit of gold left in this bag," said Tim. "I'm going to shop around tomorrow and see if it's enough to buy our way back home."

"I spoke at length with Tony the Elf about your Teleport idea," said Frank. "He thinks it's a little far-fetched."

"Yeah?"

"And I'm sorry, man. I know he's not really a basket of sunshine and optimism, but I've got to agree with him."

"If it works, it works," said Tim. "All we can do is try."

"I just don't want you to go and get your hopes up again," said Frank. "Especially after... well, you know."

"Yeah," said Tim. "I know. And you know how important morale is. We've got to hang on to whatever hope we've got, no matter how slim the odds."

"Well spoken, friend." Frank pushed himself off the crate, his weight on his good foot. He turned to Dave. "Now, if you don't mind helping me up the stairs, I've got to go and give my people some much needed good news."

"Um," said Tim. Frank turned around. "Is it still okay if we crash here tonight?"

"You boys are welcome here as long as you like."

Chapter 23

Tim, Julian, Dave, Cooper, and Chaz stood outside a cute little two-story cottage with cobblestone walls and a thatched roof. It was the sort of place that an irresponsible parent might send their daughter through a wolf-infested forest to deliver goodies to. This was no forest though, and this cottage was one of the many places of business lining the street which seemed designed to invoke some sort of old-world fairy tale nostalgia. That's the gist Tim got anyway. For all he knew, this was just the way shops were supposed to look in this world. It was a far cry from the area the Whore's Head was located in, where you might only recognize a storefront due to a sign painted in blood on the back of a broken shield. The sign above the door they were currently looking at had been professionally crafted, and was painted with large friendly pastel green letters on a purple background.

"Professor Goosewaddle's Potions and Scrolls Emporium," said Tim, reading the sign. It was the eighth magic shop they had been to, having been laughed out of the previous seven for such a preposterous request, and the list of options was dwindling down to nothing. Tim steeled his nerves against what would most likely be another rejection as he led his friends through the beaded doorway.

"Welcome," said a soothing female voice, the source of which was nowhere to be seen in the dark and dusty shop, "to Professor Goosewaddle's Potions and Scrolls Emporium."

"Who's there?" said Tim. He squinted his eyes as they adjusted from the bright light outside. Shelves lined the walls, stocked with glass bottles, clay jars, and steel scroll tubes. A quaint spiral staircase led up to the second floor of the shop. Conspicuously absent, however, was a shop attendant to whom Tim could attribute the voice.

"Sleeping potions are on sale this week," the voice continued as if Tim hadn't spoken. "Get the rest you deserve. Completely safe and non habit-forming. Now available in lemon flavor."

"Show yourself," said Tim. He put his hand on the pommel of his sword, just to reassure himself that it was there.

"Or perhaps we could interest you in a scroll of Whispering Wind. When you're far from home, you can still tell that special someone you care."

"I don't want a scroll of Whispering Wind, dammit!"

"Feeling unattractive?"

"Fuck you!"

"Why not try a potion of –"

The voice was cut short by two sharp claps. The source of this sound was also invisible, but at least it was coming from a discernible

direction.

Tim moved cautiously toward the counter. The clapping had come from the open doorway behind the counter, but the doorway was empty.

“Hello?” said Tim.

A white-bearded face popped up over the counter. “Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Professor Goosewaddle. What can I brew for you today?”

Tim cleared his throat. “We... um...”

“We need a spell cast on us,” said Julian, who was at a better height to look him in the eye.

“Well, sirs,” said the professor chirpily. “You’ve come to the right place.” He climbed all the way up onto the counter, revealing a stature no bigger than Tim’s. He was a gnome. He sat with his feet dangling over the edge of the counter. “What’ll it be? Constitution? Night out with the whores? Want to keep your stamina up? That it?”

“What?” said Julian. “No, we –”

“Don’t worry,” the professor went on. “I get you young fellers in here all the time, always too shy to just come right out and say what they want. There’s no shame in it, boys. You think I haven’t shacked up with a whore or two in my day? My transaction records are completely confidential. What happens at Professor Goosewaddle’s Magic Emporium stays at Pro—”

“We need a Teleport,” said Tim.

Professor Goosewaddle frowned down at Tim. “I’m sorry, my lad. That’s just not the way Teleport works. Teleport is a spell which the caster casts on himself. Not on another.”

“I know how the spell works,” said Tim. “It’s been explained to us seven times already today.”

“So what made you think my explanation would be any different?”

“I don’t know,” said Tim. “I guess I was hoping you’d be smarter, or more imaginative, or just plain greedier.”

The professor stroked his beard. Tim had his attention.

“Come into some money, have you boys?”

Tim’s eyes shifted involuntarily toward the Bag of Holding in Cooper’s hand. He quickly looked back at the gnome on the counter. “We’ve got some stashed away.”

The lie fell flat. Professor Goosewaddle stared at the Bag of Holding. *Shit.*

The professor looked at Tim and smiled. “No need to fear, lads,” he said. “I run an honest shop. I’ve got no desire to tangle with a bunch of young fellers at my age.” He sighed and adjusted his glasses. “Let’s say I could cast the spell on you lads instead of myself. A few alterations of the incantation should sort that out well enough. But

there's a bigger problem, you see."

Tim dared to get his hopes up just a bit. This was much further than he'd gotten with any of the other wizards and sorcerers he'd talked to today. "What's the problem?"

Professor Goosewaddle pulled a comically long pipe out of his sleeve and lit the bowl with a snap of his fingers. He took a few puffs to get it started. "The spell requires that one be intimately familiar with the desired destination. Are you planning to go somewhere I might have been before?"

Tim frowned. "No," he said weakly. "I don't think so."

"Then I'm sorry, my boy. I just don't see how I can help you."

"What about telepathy?" asked Julian.

Everyone looked at him.

"Go on," said the professor.

"If you could read our minds while you cast the spell, could you be familiar enough with the destination?"

"Hmmm..." said the gnome. He took a long drag on his pipe. "Clever lad. That's thinking outside the box. I'll admit you have provided me with an interesting challenge. I never could resist a puzzle."

"Then you'll do it?" asked Tim, perhaps a bit too eagerly.

"I'll consider it. It will be complicated for certain, if not impossible. So no promises. You understand?"

"Of course!" said Tim.

"Give me the night to think it over."

"Anything you want," said Tim, already shoving Cooper toward the doorway.

"And I expect to be paid for my effort," the professor called out after them as they scrambled out the door. "Don't spend all your money on whores!"

Tim exited the shop in high spirits, but that faded when he saw a tall, lanky figure lurking near an alley about two blocks away, pretending to not be looking at them. He'd seen this person outside of at least two of the magic shops they'd been to earlier in the day. Twice could be dismissed as mere coincidence. Maybe the guy was just browsing the magic shops, looking for an enchanted ring. But not a third time. Anyway, this guy wasn't shopping. He was spying.

When it came to people who would want to spy on his group, Tim had a very short list of suspects. He could rule out Pestilence. That half-orc could pick his tusks with this skinny bastard. Frank had said the wizard who had blown the place up called himself War. The guy lurking in an alley was no wizard. Tim knew a rogue when he saw one. If Tim remembered Revelations correctly, that left only Famine and Death. He had a pretty good idea which one this was.

"Famine!" Tim shouted.

The figure jumped like he'd just licked a wall socket.

"That's one of them!" cried Tim.

"One of who?" asked Cooper.

"The fucking Horsemen, you dolt!"

"Oh," said Cooper. He put his hand on his axe.

Tim put his hand on Cooper's arm, but kept his eyes on Famine. Strangely enough, the lanky rogue neither advanced nor fled. Tim guessed he was waiting for them to make the first move, knowing he could easily outrun them if it came to that.

"Listen," said Tim, just loud enough for his friends to hear him. He tried not to move his lips when he spoke. "Don't look now. There's an inn about a block behind us and across the street. Dave and Julian. You are going to get a room there. Understood?"

"Okay," said Julian.

"Cooper," Tim continued. "You are going to chase that skinny bastard until you lose him."

"Suppose I catch him," said Cooper.

"Don't," said Tim. "Just let him go. Whatever you do, don't follow him into an alley or anything. He'll be extremely dangerous once he's out of your line of sight. Just follow him until you lose him, and then join Julian and Dave in the inn. The three of you sit tight and don't make a fucking peep."

"What are you going to do?" asked Dave.

"I'm going to sneak off and tell Frank the plan. Then I'll join you back at the inn."

"Why don't we all go see him together?" asked Dave.

"Famine saw us come out of this magic shop," said Tim. "He saw us looking excited. I want to keep an eye on this place until we're all set to go."

Famine was looking fidgety, as if he was considering making the first move after all. That wouldn't do.

"Are you ready?" asked Tim.

"Just a sec," said Julian. "We have a plan?"

"I'm going to tell Frank about Professor Goosewaddle, and that Famine spotted us. I'm going to tell him to hold tight, and that if this works, we'll see about getting our hands on those magic dice, and getting all of them back home. Time is running out. Cooper, are you ready?"

"Yeah."

"Go."

"Bwwwwaaaaaaaarrrrrgggghhhh!" said Cooper, running like a rabid gorilla toward the rogue. Famine bolted down the street. Tim thought that odd. He would have chosen the alley.

“Okay,” said Tim as soon as he had lost sight of Famine. “You two, go.”

Julian and Dave made their way to the inn. Tim ducked down a side street and made his way back to the Whore’s Head.

Chapter 24

Julian and Dave sat nervously in their crummy inn room. Dave sat on the rough, wooden floor and leaned back against the wall, chipping off flakes of the pus-yellow paint where his armor made contact. His head kept drooping down, and he repeatedly jerked it back up again, knocking more paint off of the wall with his helmet.

“Stay awake,” said Julian. “We need to be ready for the worst.”

“I don’t think I can,” said Dave. “I’m exhausted.”

“I’m pretty tired, too,” said Julian. “I’m going to set an alarm spell in case we drift off.”

“If an alarm goes off, won’t that just bring attention to us?”

“During the incantation, I can specify who won’t trigger it. You, me, Tim, Cooper, Chaz, Butterbean, and Ravenus. Anything else larger than a bug that tries to get in here will set it off.”

“What if the manager of the inn pops in for something?”

“Okay, good thinking,” said Julian. “I’ll include the inn staff as well. Anyone else who tries to get in here would certainly be one of the Horsemen.”

Julian rummaged through his pouches of spell components until he found a piece of chalk. He whispered incantations and drew boundary lines around the door and window. “There, it’s done.”

Cooper opened the door and walked in. “Hey guys.”

“See?” said Julian. “It works.”

Dave’s only response was a loud snore.

“What works?” asked Cooper.

“I set an alarm to go off if anyone comes in here while we’re sleeping.”

“It’s kind of a shitty alarm. I just walked in, and I didn’t hear anything.”

“You are on the list of people who won’t trip it,” said Julian.

Cooper lay down on the floor. “Cool. Well I’m gonna get some sleep too.”

“Okay.”

Julian sat on the room’s only chair and stared out of the window. The setting sun painted orange clouds on the pink sky. As the sky grew darker, the streetlamps, which he guessed must each contain an object permanently enchanted with a Light spell, began to take over the sun’s job of keeping the city streets lit. After the hustle and bustle of the marketplace died down, Julian scrutinized the few people remaining on the street. None of them looked overly suspicious or threatening... at least not to Julian’s exhausted brain. Before long, he slipped into a trance.

He snapped out of his trance some point less than four hours later to a cacophony of bells, whistles, and horns. It sounded as though a car alarm and an air raid siren were having a heated argument about politics.

Tim stood in the doorway with his hands over his ears. Next to him was a very surprised looking pig, more than twice his size.

“What the fuck?” Tim shouted over the noise. “Make it stop!”

The pig shat on the floor.

“Stop!” said Julian. The alarm stopped instantly. The only sounds were the residual ringing in his ears and a person in the next room over banging on the wall.

“Sorry!” Julian called out at the wall.

“Asshole!” came a voice from the street outside.

“What the hell was that?” asked Tim.

“I set an alarm,” said Julian. “In case anyone tried to get in here.”

“What the hell did you do that for?” asked Tim. “You knew I’d be coming back.”

“I didn’t know you were bringing a giant fucking pig with you, did I?”

“I bought it for Katherine,” said Tim. “She needs to eat.” He walked the pig across the room and picked up the Bag of Holding. The pig grunted. It still looked shaken from the alarm. “Come on, Porky. It’s safe in here.” Tim lifted the lip of the bag and guided the pig inside. As soon as the tip of its curly pink tail passed the lip, the bag collapsed into a seemingly empty heap on the floor.

“Poor little pig,” said Cooper.

“The only thing I asked you to do was to stay here and not do anything,” said Tim. “How could you possibly fuck that up?”

“Sorry,” said Julian. “I just thought –”

“It doesn’t matter now,” said Tim. “We have to get out of here.”

“Ho there!” boomed a voice from the hallway. “There’s people tryin’ to sleep in here!” A large bald man stood in the doorway. It took Julian a second, but he soon recognized him as the guy they had rented the room from. He looked a lot less intimidating now that he was wearing what appeared to be a Snuggie. “What’s the meaning of – Hey, why is there shit on me floor?”

“Um...” said Cooper. “That was me.”

“Nice save, Coop,” said Tim.

“You lot get the hell out of me inn before I knocks ye faces in.”

“We were just leaving,” said Tim.

They hadn’t been out on the street one minute when a whistle broke the night’s recently restored silence. Julian turned his head just in time to catch a glimpse of a shadow ducking quickly away into the darker shadows of an alley three blocks up the street.

"Shit," said Tim. "We've been made."

"What should we do?" asked Dave.

"There's a light on at Professor Goosewaddle's shop," said Julian. "We could ask him if we could crash there until morning."

"We need this guy on our side," said Tim. "We're not going to make a very good impression barging in there in the middle of the night."

"This way!" called a nasally voice from down the street. "They're over here."

"If anyone has any better ideas," said Dave, "now is the time to speak."

"Fuck," said Tim. "Come on. Let's go."

Julian was the first to arrive at the door. He jiggled the handle, but the door was locked. He knocked rapidly on the door while the rest of the party caught up.

"Keep yer britches on," said a sleepy voice on the other side of the door. "I'm coming."

When the door finally creaked open, the recorded message began. "Welcome to Professor Goosewaddle's Potions and –"

The professor clapped his hands and the message stopped. "Oh, it's you. Do you lads have any idea what time it is?"

"Um... no," said Cooper.

"We're sorry, professor," said Julian. "We saw the light on and thought you were awake."

"Some jackass down the street set off an Alarm spell," said the professor. "Don't suppose I'll be getting any more sleep tonight. Come on in."

The party crowded inside as quickly as they could without actually stampeding over the little gnome. Cooper slammed the door shut behind them.

"Something troubling you lads?" asked the professor.

There was no point in lying. Julian came clean. "There's a group of guys out there trying to murder us."

"Well," said Professor Goosewaddle. "Thank you so much for bringing them to my shop." He looked annoyed, which Julian assessed was about the best they could have hoped for. Angry would have been bad, and afraid would have been catastrophic.

"Calm yourselves, gentlemen. No one enters Professor Goosewaddle's Potions and Scrolls Emporium against the will of Professor Goosewaddle." The professor sprinkled a line of sparkly purple powder on the floor in front of the doorway and muttered to himself. When he was finished muttering, the powder turned into a bright pink liquid and crept up through the cracks between the door and the frame, until the whole thing was sealed.

The handle wiggled a little, but the door didn't budge.

“Come out, you cowards!” It was Eric, the guy who called himself Pestilence. “We know you’re in there!”

“Fuck off, Eric,” said Tim.

“How long do you think you can hide in there?” said Eric, continuing to pound on the door. “If you send out the half-orc, we’ll call it even.”

Cooper shook his head. “It always comes down to that, doesn’t it?”

“Come on, half-orc,” Eric called out with taunting mirth in his voice. “If you suck my cock, I might just let you live.” His friends snickered.

“No thanks,” said Cooper. “Your mom’s cock tasted like ham. It was unsettling. Put me right off cocks for good.”

“Julian,” said Tim. “Do you see any way we can resolve this diplomatically?”

“They want to murder us,” said Julian. “And Cooper just told a dude his mom’s cock tastes like ham. I think we’re beyond my skill level in Diplomacy.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Tim. He took the Bag of Holding from Cooper and scurried up the little spiral staircase.

Julian looked through the peephole of the door. Eric was standing right there, looking furious. Two other figures stood behind him. One wore loose green robes, suitable for the gestures a wizard or sorcerer would have to make while casting spells. That must be War. The other was clad in a simple black cloak. The hood cast a shadow over his face. Death, no doubt. He was even carrying a scythe. A walking cliché. Julian supposed he ought to be scared, but he couldn’t help seeing these guys as trick-or-treaters.

“All the puke!” Tim shouted from upstairs. A torrent of vomit rained down on Eric’s head. War and Death stepped back and looked up. They were spared all but a few specks that splashed on their clothes.

Eric stopped beating on the door. He brushed a glob of it off of his shoulder and shook a fist up in the air. “Why you little –”

“Pig!” shouted Tim. A second later, Eric covered his face with his forearms as an emaciated dead pig landed on him. Katherine had really gone to town on it. Julian didn’t think there could be a drop of blood left in it.

Eric lay in a pool of vomit under the mutilated corpse of a giant pig. As soon as the shock and horror of that wore off, he pushed the pig off of him and scrambled backward. War and Death helped him to his feet.

War began muttering to himself, and his hands burst into flames. He brought his hands together, and the flames coalesced into a sphere of fire.

“Tim!” cried Julian. “Watch out!” But it was too late. Julian shielded his eyes from the fiery white explosion which engulfed his tiny field of vision.

“Shit!” said Julian. “They Fireballed Tim!”

Cooper ran to the stairwell, but Tim was already on his way down. Nothing was visibly wrong with him, except that he looked a little shaken and his right hand was covered in vomit.

“Do any of you guys have a towel?” asked Tim.

“Dammit, Scott!” came Eric’s voice from outside.

“Call me War,” said War.

“Dammit, War!”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I guess the place is protected against magic.”

Julian looked through the peephole. Eric had removed his helmet. His face was covered in soot. War’s robes were singed at the edges, and Death lay on the ground with his cloak still on fire.

War and Pestilence were doing their best to pat out the flames. Famine was still conspicuously absent.

“They look really pissed off,” said Julian.

“Well,” said Cooper. “Maybe it’s about time they were pissed *on*.” He started up the stairs.

“Wait, Cooper!” said Julian. “Don’t!”

By the time Julian made it up the stairs, Cooper was already standing at the window with his dick out.

“Hey fuckers!” Cooper called down. “Allow me to assist you.” And so the stream started. It was a strong, dark yellow stream. It steamed in the cool night air.

“Yea—” Eric started to protest, and Julian had no doubt he was cut off by a jet of half-orc piss to the face.

“Get him!” shouted Eric, presumably having moved out of the line of fire.

Julian wondered who he was talking to, but his curiosity was satisfied an instant later when a pale skeletal face peeked up over the window sill.

“Ha!” cried Famine, shoving a curved dagger into Cooper’s belly.

“Ow!” said Cooper, quickly adjusting the position of his dick.

Maybe Famine had believed the element of surprise was going to allow him to wound Cooper enough such that he would be unable to piss in his face. Maybe he thought Cooper would retreat, or try to fight him, instead of pissing in his face. Maybe he had just mentally braced himself for getting a face full of piss, and thought he could take it... maybe get a few more stabs in. Whatever his logic, it failed him. His gloved hand lost its grip on the stone wall. His gurgling scream was interrupted by his chin hitting the window sill, and he fell out of

sight onto the street below.

Cooper turned around and pulled the blade out of his belly. He barely winced. He held it up to show Julian. "Free knife."

Julian ran to the window. Eric was walking away, carrying Death in his arms. War supported Famine, who had apparently sustained an injury to his ankle.

Eric turned around and looked up at Julian. "Wish your friend good luck for me," he said. He flashed an evil grin, turned back around, and continued to retreat.

Julian turned to Cooper. "He said 'Good luck'."

"That's awfully sporting of him," said Cooper.

"Come on," said Julian. "Let's get out of here."

When he got down the stairs, Tim was already in business negotiations with Professor Goosewaddle, each of them standing on a stack of boxes on either side of the front counter.

Tim held the Bag of Holding open and put his hand inside. "All the gold," he said. An impressive pile of gold spilled out, maybe close to a thousand coins in all.

"Holy balls!" said Julian.

"That's it?" said the professor. He was clearly not as impressed with the pile as Julian was.

"That's all we've got," said Tim. "That's a shitload of gold."

"Magic don't come cheap, lad," said the professor. "And what you asked for was beyond the typical spellcasting I'm accustomed to. This required imagination, special equipment." He shook his head. "This will be adequate for one of you. That's all." He folded his little arms in a gesture of finality.

"Come on, man!" said Tim. "It's no good just sending one of us. We all need to go home."

"I'll send two more for that Bag of Holding you've got there."

Tim clutched the bag and held it to his chest. "No way," he said. "I've got something valuable in here."

"Well then," Professor Goosewaddle said, smiling. "Now maybe you've got something to negotiate with."

"It's valuable to me," said Tim. "It wouldn't be valuable to you."

"I think I've been more than reasonable in these negotiations," said the professor. His voice was showing signs of impatience. "My offer stands. For the gold you've provided here, I'll Teleport one of you. That's all."

"That's enough," said Julian.

"What?" said Dave.

"Think about it," said Julian. "Tim goes back, figures out how to work the magic dice, and brings back the rest of us."

"What if it's not as easy as all that to figure out?" asked Dave.

Julian had had just about enough of Dave second-guessing him. “If you’ve got any better ideas –”

“Fuck,” said Dave. “I’m not going through this again. Fine. Good luck, Tim.”

“Are you sure I should be the one to go?” asked Tim.

“You’re the smartest one here,” said Cooper. “If anyone can figure it out, it’s you. Anyway, it’s your restaurant.”

“But what if Dave’s right?” asked Tim. “What if I can’t figure it out? Hell, what if the dice aren’t even there? We don’t know how much time has passed. They could be in some police evidence locker, and I could have a warrant out for my arrest for all we know.”

“If that’s the case,” said Julian, “then we’re all fucked anyway. Make a deal. Say you’ll sign a confession after they bring you the dice. If you’re able to make the rest of us materialize inside the interrogation room, you’ll be well on your way to mounting a plausible defense.”

“That’s pretty clever,” admitted Dave.

“I watch a lot of Law and Order.”

“Me too. I don’t seem to remember that episode.”

Tim smiled and shook his head. “I’ll do this only if everyone is on board.”

“I’m in,” said Cooper.

Julian just nodded.

“Julian’s right,” said Dave. “It’s the best plan we’ve got. I’m in.”

Tim let out a long, nervous breath. “I guess that’s that then.”

“Then please follow me,” said Professor Goosewaddle. He led Tim into the room behind the counter.

Not minding that they hadn’t been invited, the rest of the party shuffled in after them.

The room was dimly lit with candles. The floor and walls were crowded with runes and symbols, all of them well above Julian’s level of magical comprehension. In the center of the room stood two wooden chairs, each with an identical domed headpiece mounted at the top, like you might find in a beauty salon. The chairs faced one another, and the headpieces were connected by a cord of what looked to be once-living tissue. Maybe it was the intestine of some animal. The only difference between the two chairs was that one of them sat atop a large circular rune drawn on the floor. This is the chair which Professor Goosewaddle climbed into.

“Have a seat,” the professor told Tim, gesturing to the chair opposite his own.

“How does it work?” asked Tim, tentatively climbing into the chair. He sat up straight, hugging the Bag of Holding on his lap.

“Truth be told, it wasn’t as hard as I imagined,” said the professor.

“Now mind you, that’s not to say you aren’t getting a fair deal. Years of experience, that’s what you’re paying for.”

“I understand.”

Professor Goosewaddle strapped the headpiece onto his head and nodded for Tim to do the same. “These will allow your thoughts to travel to my brain, uninterrupted by the weak anti-magical field emanating from the rune my chair is sitting on.”

Tim looked at him quizzically.

“The big circle on the floor,” said the professor. “Do try to keep up. It’s weak enough for my magic to send you on your way, but will provide me an anchor to hold onto. Understand?”

“Not really,” said Tim. “But that’s okay. I don’t need to understand. If it works, that’s good enough for me.”

“Apathy,” the professor muttered to himself. “That’s what’s wrong with young people today.” He spoke up. “Fine, then. If that’s the way you want it, it’s your gold.”

“Let’s go,” said Tim, strapping on his headpiece.

“Now,” said the professor. “Close your mind and clear your head. Visualize, as specifically as you can, where exactly you want to go.”

Tim did as he was told, and Professor Goosewaddle closed his eyes as well. Tim’s headpiece began to glow with blue light. It glowed dimly at first, but slowly grew more intense. The light traveled along the cord, creeping along for the first couple of inches.

Something grabbed hard on Julian’s arm. He jumped, but it was just Dave.

“It’s working!” Dave whispered excitedly.

“Shh,” said Julian. He focused his attention back on the... science experiment?

The magic crept along the cord for another inch, and then suddenly zipped across to the professor’s headpiece, which then flickered on like a fluorescent bulb. The whole room was bathed in soft blue light.

Professor Goosewaddle opened his eyes, and a wave of energy radiated out from him. Julian’s hair blew back. The candles were all blown out, leaving everything in the room looking that much bluer. The professor’s body went rigid. The chair he sat in now reminded Julian less of a beauty salon, and more of an old-timey electric chair.

Julian stared at the professor’s eyes. There was something off about them. There was an image inside them. He couldn’t make it out, exactly, as he was too far away. From where he stood, it was like seeing an image refracted through a droplet of water. He dared not move any closer, but he wagered that if he did, he’d see the inside of the Chicken Hut in those eyes.

“What is this place?” Professor Goosewaddle whispered.

“It’s home,” said Tim. His eyes were still closed.

“Fascinating,” said the professor. He then mumbled a few words, waved his hands around, and then the room went dark and silent.

Cooper farted. “Sorry.”

A flame flicked on suddenly, and Professor Goosewaddle’s face was illuminated by the tiny ball of fire he held in his hand. He casually tossed the fireball across the room, where it landed atop a candle. He guided the flame from one candle to another until the room was completely lit once again.

Tim’s chair was empty.

Julian’s heart skipped a beat. “Did it work?” he asked, assuming that a negative answer would mean Tim had been disintegrated.

“Of course it worked!” snapped Professor Goosewaddle. He adjusted his headpiece, but did not remove it. “Who’s next?”

“What do you mean?” asked Dave. “I thought you said we –”

“I changed my mind. Consider your debt paid in full.”

“Why?” asked Dave. He sounded suspicious.

Professor Goosewaddle smiled. “Because, lad. I’m going with you.”

Chapter 25

When Tim opened his eyes, a shiny black rectangle sat before him, bordering an animated picture of fish idly swimming from one side to the other. He never imagined he'd be so happy to see that shitty screen saver. The Bag of Holding was still on his lap. He set the bag on his desk and pushed off the edge of the desk to spin the office chair around once before standing up.

"Wha!" he said as he fell to the floor.

What the hell? He stood and looked up... and then up some more. This was the Chicken Hut, alright, but something was wrong about it. It was out of proportion... like a Chicken Hut made for giants. Something was very very wrong.

Fuck.

Tim knew in his tiny heart exactly what was wrong, but he had to confirm it with his eyes. He rolled the office chair over to the wall with the cracked mirror and climbed up onto it. The fact that he had to climb all but negated the need to look in the mirror, but he climbed up anyway.

The cracked fragments of eyes that stared back at him were bright green and wide with panic. He was still a fucking hobbit.

No! No no no no no no no no!

What was he going to do? He couldn't go through life like this? He'd have to get a new driver's license. Maybe a whole new identity.

Calm down, Tim. Get a hold of yourself. We have more immediate concerns.

Tim hopped down from the chair and hurried to the dining area. The whole place looked like he had traveled here via beanstalk. The lights were still on. That was odd. The sky was pale and overcast. It was either early in the morning or late in the evening.

Most importantly, Tim noted as he looked out the front window, was the lack of police tape sealing off the building from the public. That could mean one of two things. Either the preliminary investigation had been completed already, or he still had time to get rid of a body.

How was a three-foot-tall halfling going to move that fat bastard's body out of the freezer? He wished Cooper was there with him. And where was he going to dump it? He bit his lower lip as he considered typing "How to dump a body" into a search engine. If the shit hit the fan, his internet history log could come back to haunt him.

No. He had a better idea. He'd re-watch the first season of *Breaking Bad* to figure out what that chemical shit was that they dissolved the bodies in. *Perfect.*

It was time to face the music. Tim walked to the walk-in freezer door like he was walking to his own execution. As he reached up to grab the latch, he heard a crash from the bathroom.

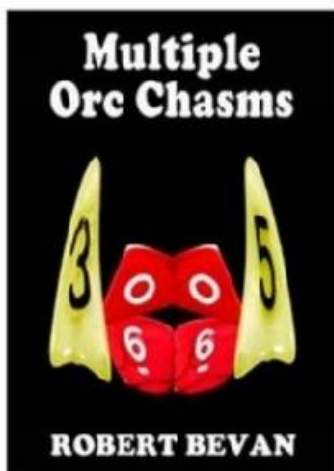
Shit! Someone else was here!

There was only one thing to do. Hide himself, and the dead body, behind some boxes of frozen chicken, and hope that it was only a hobo looking for a private place to have a wank. He pulled on the latch, and was assaulted by a cloud of foul-smelling misty air.

Damn. He thought the low temperature would have kept the body from decomposing so quickly.

It only took a second or two for the mist to evaporate. There was Mordred, squatting against the back wall, taking a dump on the floor.

The End.



CAVERNS & CREATURES

Get 'Multiple Orc Chasms' for FREE!

Enter your email address to get your free ebook:

CLICK HERE!

Don't stop now! The adventure continues!

[CLICK HERE TO SEE THE REST OF THE C&C COLLECTION.](#)

For updates on what I'm currently working on, reviews, or just to come by and say hello, you can find me here on [Facebook](#), and here at www.caverns-and-creatures.com.

Thank you, No Hyun Jun, for your fantastic cover art.

Thank you, Joan Reginaldo, for continuing to read through my dreadful first drafts.

Thank you, No Young Sook, for your love and support.

If you enjoyed this story, please leave a review. It would mean so much to me.